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BY COVERT, FIELD AND MARSH



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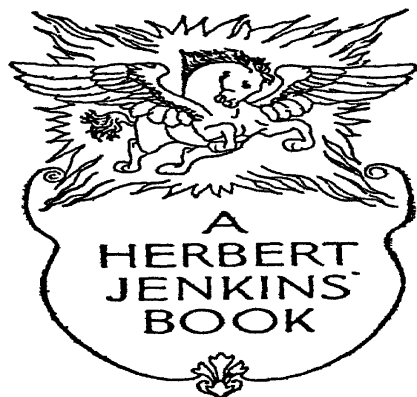
BY COVERT, FIELD AND MARSH

by

NOEL M. SEDGWICK

Editor of the "Shooting Times and British Sportsman."

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DEDICATED
TO
MY GOOD FRIEND
GEORGE WALKER
OF WHITWELL MANOR
IN THE COUNTY OF NOTTS.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

No doubt every sportsman and field naturalist should keep a diary ; if not a day-to-day diary, then one which records the more interesting observations and events that come his way. I have never kept a diary in this sense, but I have a habit of making odd jottings of special concern on the back of old envelopes and scraps of paper—and then of losing them, or of carrying them about in my pocket until the writing becomes illegible. Nevertheless, quite a number of these jottings do survive, finding sanctuary in the corner of a drawer in my desk. One day recently, I was going through this drawer, and the idea came to me that I might write a little story, or cameo, round some of the notes I had collected. The idea grew and, with pressure from a long-suffering wife, I at length decided to do so. And this I have accomplished, for better or for worse. I would make it clear, however, that the entries cover several of the war years and *not* the single span of twelve months, and that I have made no attempt at “polished” writing.

As the Editor of a well-known shooting paper, it might possibly be thought that I should indulge less in describing small one-man, or two-man shooting days and rambles afield, confining myself rather to country-house shoots and “big” days on the moors, by the covert-side and so on. I probably could write such a book. But this present one is not concerned with “big” days. It is a perfectly simple series of cameos of “potterings” with dog and gun, which I hope, and believe, will appeal to the rough shooter, and perhaps prove instructive. If it does not make a similar appeal to the more conventional types of shooting man, then I am sorry ; but it should do so ! Every sportsman should be a naturalist, if only an elementary one. He should learn to be observant ; to appreciate his environments ; to study methods of game preservation and how game is eventually “shown” to the guns. The ability of clever gun-performance can be a great asset in the shooting field, but I would rate it no higher than that. Without a fairly intimate knowledge and understanding of game and wild life, and all that this infers, the charm of shooting is reduced almost to a mechanical sport. And I, for one, am no mechanic !

I suppose every author, having completed his work, is nibbled by a literary gremlin who repeatedly urges that he might have made a better job of it, and that some form of apology should preface the book. In this case, I believe my literary gremlin to be right. It is difficult enough to build up a book on countless scraps of paper ; it is still more difficult (or so I find) to do so

during the stress and strain of war-time living. That, then, is my apology for the many shortcomings of which I shall, in due course, hear more at the hands of relentless reviewers. If, however, even one chapter of my book gives one single sportsman a little pleasure, then I shall feel that the work involved has not been in vain.

Gratefully I acknowledge my indebtedness to the Proprietors of the *Shooting Times* for permission to use certain cameos and incidents that may have appeared in that paper, to which I have had the honour to contribute for some twenty-five years. Also to the Proprietors of *Picture Post* for allowing me to reproduce the excellent photographs that illustrate this book.

N. M. S.

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CHAPTER I.

PHEASANTS IN WAR AND PEACE.

A FRIEND in the Midlands wrote to me one day to tell me of a fine pheasant he had seen about his shoot, its two wings being almost white. This was obviously a Chinese or Chinese cross, and it brings back memories of the last year we reared pheasants on a large scale. For several seasons we bought a number of black cocks (melanistic mutants) for releasing in the breeding pens, and we also procured annually either one or two Chinese cocks. In those days I used to go picking-up on big estates all over the county, but I do not think I ever saw such a variety of really handsome pheasants as we produced from our downland coverts. Or, on the whole, better flying ones.

I had always fancied the black pheasant, perhaps because as chicks they are far and away more lively, energetic and enterprising than the more usual kinds, partly because it is such a good flyer and makes such a fine "cross," but mainly I championed it because I felt it was being unduly libelled by those who did not take a fancy to it, and accused it of straying. In fact, of course, it does stray.

At first, we were the only shoot that harboured and bred black birds in that part of the country, and a fair number of them began to appear on neighbouring shoots and on estates at quite a distance ; they had obviously strayed and we did not seek to deny it. Indeed, we felt not a little indignant that others should claim our birds ! On the other hand, are not all pheasants given to straying ? Even the hand-reared bird still retains this trait in its character—if trait it really is. A black pheasant that strays is quickly recognised, but not so the common-coloured pheasant, unless it has some peculiar marking, or injury, or has been ringed. In my estimation, and I have had fairly wide experience of the melanistic mutant, it will be a great shame if it does not

remain popular, for it makes a handsome and a heavy cross and is the best flyer and rocketeer of them all.

I remember one day in particular. It had been a grand morning, with sunshine lighting up the dark green fir coverts splashed with the gold of larch, and the whole late autumnal drabness of the downs seemed to glow with a warmth and freshness akin to those of an early September day. The two previous drives had proved a success and now, at the finish of the third, some hundred and twenty pheasants lay in two rows on the green, moss-carpeted path of the valley. And what a sight for dust-filled eyes they were—happy results of Black, Chinese, Ringneck and Mongolian cocks fulfilling their duties in the breeding pens ! Only one fly—and that a big one, I fear—was in the ointment ; someone, despite my earlier warning, had shot the Chinese cock ; someone who confessed a little shamefacedly when good-byes were said at the finish of the day. Now, the black pheasant sport is, itself, a small, wiry bird, but the result of crossing appears to infuse the excellent flying qualities of the cock with the “ meatier ” weight and size of the more common hens. Here lay, in the mellow sunlight, birds of dark purple and bottle-green hues ; elegant, though paler Chinese-Mongolian and ringneck crosses, and despite the vivid description of such a wealth of colour and shade which might be given by an abler pen than mine, “ handsome ” seems to be the rather drab adjective which fitted those gaily-plumaged cocks and less conspicuous hens.

Very soon, I hope, we may be once more interesting ourselves in the practical rearing of pheasants in their hundreds of thousands, for even the small shoots and cabbage patches—yes, and the artichoke patches—benefit from the overflow of birds brought up on large estates—thanks, again, to that characteristic of the long-tail to prove itself an inveterate nomad.

Sometimes it seems to me, in these days of empty larders and high prices, something of a wonder that I can still ride along country roads and lanes at dusk and dawn and hear a few wily old birds chortling and crowing and challenging as they ascend to, and descend from, their nightly roosts. That the pheasant is a bird of deep cunning and no small

possessor of deliberate and calculating thought I know full well, who has watched it under every condition. That fact alone, however, is not sufficient to save its feathers, for its noisy habits aforementioned have all too often proved its downfall. There are, there must be, many good sportsmen throughout the kingdom, many good amateur keepers and not a few semi-conscientious amateur pot-hunters who directly or indirectly show respect for the presence of pheasants about our woodlands and fields. How else can we account for the fact that pheasants still shout their way up to roost, and greet the rising sun, often within a stone-throw of public thoroughfares ?

And yet there comes to mind a pre-war night of anxiety—by no means the only one !—when, on a certain November 5th, we had promised to give a grand firework display to a number of children—that is, before we were “ tipped off ” that poachers intended raiding our coverts on that night of gunpowder and sparks. . With three hundred birds in one small covert ; with two hundred in another ; with several such coverts “ stiff ” with birds, our duty was plain. That night we watched throughout the moonlit hours, listening to distant detonations and seeing from our high ground rockets bursting in the sky all over the county. Sometimes a lark would spring from the grass with a noisy twittering ; sometimes a hare would rustle by ; sometimes we fancied we saw a dark form slinking silently up the side of a covert. Dawn, however, found us watching still, with no unseemly incidents to mar the night. Such vigils were by no means unusual, but that particular night stands out in memory—perhaps because of the date. Or perhaps because Young Jim, with pride in his new-found rank as “ deputy letter-off of fireworks,” inadvertently dropped a squib into a whole hamper of “ bangers ” and set off the lot—happily without serious casualty to his admiring audience.

'January 4th.

A touch of lumbago encourages me to pen a few remarks on some of the types of men I dislike in the shooting field ! The business man, I dislike, who does nothing but talk “ shop ” from the time he arrives at the meeting place, to

the time he collects his game and takes his departure. From stand to stand he walks, often talking loudly enough to make the squatting partridges for miles round duck their heads in alarm. He passes down the avenue, or the ride in the wood, ablaze with autumnal fire, stumps his way up the winding track towards where the blue hills stand out in bold silhouette against a stormy sky, or wanders down the boulder-strewn track over which the bracken flames, and sees little more than that which lies a few yards ahead—that and the lengthening ash of his own cigar. Waiting the sound of the keeper's whistle heralding the approach of a covey, or the shout of a beater announcing a pheasant crashing upwards through the trees, he chatters and chatters to the man at the next stand, at the last minute leaving him, to go puffing to his own. And let me hasten to say that this remark is not intended to refer to all business men (far, far from it!)—only to that type whose interest in shooting ends with the idea of a deal brought off, or a client “interested”; who takes not the slightest pains to understand how game is preserved and cleverly shown; to whom an appreciation of environment is a dormant instinct.

There are many other men, often “good fellows,” who will talk in the shooting field when they should be silent; will move from their stands either to chat, or in the hope of getting better shooting. They are a menace and a danger, and, however charming they are elsewhere and however good company, they deserve to be openly rated.

Some poor shots who always state loudly they have one or more birds down at each stand (when they know perfectly well that they haven't) are to be pitied rather than remonstrated with, but others of the most chronic type become a general nuisance. Some pickers-up have a method of dealing with them!

I dislike the guest who turns up late, who tries to dominate his host, and perhaps the keeper. He suggests this and that drive and attempts to force his personality on those most concerned with the day's sport.

Some naturally jealous shots just “can't help themselves” (unless it is to other people's birds—alive or dead). They are full of polite excuses; are usually quite good shots, but



PHEASANTS IN PEACE AND WAR

“ ‘ Handsome ’ seems to be the rather drab adjective which fitted those
gaily-plumaged cocks and less conspicuous hens ”



GOOD TYPES
his misses were few and far between "

I should like to kick their legs from under them when this trait becomes almost overbearing to watch.

And hang the man who, on a serious day's driving, brings his dog along (usually uninvited) on a string "just to try her out." The shooting field proper is not the place to train a dog. Nor (even though hounds do not hunt the district) is it the place to take a shot at a fox if there are hunting men among the guests.

Devil mark the sportsman, too, who continually takes too long shots, straining his gun and the patience of those near him; or who shoots at rabbits and pigeon when game is close at hand. And, personally, I hold in mild contempt the man who allows vermin to slip by, even though game is expected. These last remarks may seem paradoxical, but they must be read as an understanding shot would read them. For instance, no one will blaze at grey squirrels when pheasants are being driven forward and are "herded" close in cover, yet, with beaters still far off, who can blame the trigger finger for pressing home a well-deserved lesson upon a stoat, a jay, a magpie—always providing the shot is not going to spoil possible sport for neighbouring guns? It all depends upon circumstances.

The wealthy sportsman who tips the keeper only 5s. and his poor counterpart who does likewise, adding also a word of praise and appreciation, are not in the same class—nor should they be! And here's to a puncture on the road home to the man who slips into the house to take tea with his host, harbouring in his mind a neat way of avoiding tipping the keeper at all!

There are plenty of other men I dislike, such as those who take low-flying pheasants; cannot (apparently) tell a cock from a hen; "brown" into a departing covey; fire down the line; carry guns so that their neighbours become aware of the size of the shot they are using; omit most of the rudimentary precautions of "safety first," and rules of good sportsmanship.

My lumbago feels a little easier now, and I will, in contrition maybe, write a few notes on those sportsmen to

whom I raise my hat, with whom I gladly shake a paw; of whom I say, freely and gladly, " May we meet again !"

January 5th.

Now for those few types of sportsmen that help to make a day's shooting a real pleasure. Much appreciated by host and guests is the man who, invited to shoot, lets his host know as soon as possible whether or not he will be able to come, and, accepting, arrives in good time. If he is unable to accept, an early reply gives his host the opportunity to find a fresh gun. He will also inquire if his host would like him to bring " Old Dash " along, or leave him at home. If he has not shot the place before, he will inquire how many cartridges he ought to bring. Some men seem to be in the habit of running out of cartridges and borrowing small amounts for the rest of the day. Others bring a big magazine full when a hundred to a hundred and fifty would be ample, thus making a sensitive host feel that something altogether bigger than the day in question is expected.

I like the unassuming sportsman, who, while an acknowledged good shot, is neither a jealous one nor a chooser of only certain types of " shots," but who is not too easy-going with less-pleasant neighbours. To illustrate my point, I met a fellow guest at a shoot for the first time and it was not long before I was watching him out of the corner of my eye. His style was nothing to write home about; he seemed to bend his knees slightly, hunch up his left shoulder and " aim " with some deliberation. Nevertheless, his misses were few and far between, and he shot at game well out in front and it was " a real treat " (as we say in Essex) to watch the charge of shot almost invariably catch the game in the right place. In the course of the morning he was next to me as we walked up a rough " common." " Don't let us be too polite," I said to him before we started. He understood. There were quite a number of pheasants in the long grass and reeds, three coveys of birds and plenty of snipe. We were walking fairly close and slowly, and my hint was taken by my right-hand gun. Four snipe killed were acknowledged by him as my birds, and these I accepted, as experience has long taught me when I am

“ on ” or “ off ” the target. Then down came a snipe at lengthy range at which we had both fired (remember, we had agreed not to be too polite; in other words, not to wait for each other) and I was wondering if the fringe of my pattern had caused its downfall, when my companion signalled that it was his bird. I acknowledged it, for I knew then that he had been quite certain of a “ dead on ” shot. I prefer that type of man to one who is over-polite and would rather give away a bird he knows was his than claim it—even from a jealous shot.

And how I like the man who knows how to catch and despatch wounded game without fuss or flurry. In pursuit, he always has in mind the “ safety first ” code of gun-handling. Far removed is he from the sportsman who thinks only of the game and disregards the angle at which his weapon is pointing, and perhaps even uses it to hold down a runner! Far removed, too, is he from his fellow guest who retrieves a fluttering bird and asks someone else to kill it, or (if he does not pull off its head in an attempt at what he calls “ wringing its neck ”) again puts other guns in danger while he tries to bang its head against the stock of his weapon, or the heel of his boot. If you cannot sever the vertebrae of your game’s neck neatly and to good purpose, then hold the wings of the bird close to the body and give the head a sharp tap on the heel, taking care the while where your weapon is pointing. My model of the shooting field finds no trouble in the despatch of birds, nor with larger game like hares, be they never so bloody. Nor, by the way, does he, if shooting less well than usual, heel one or two cartridge cases into the ground at his stand with the idea of hoodwinking the calculating, eagle-eyed keeper.

The understanding sportsman may ask for the assistance of a dog, but he does not call or interfere with another man’s dog. Nor, if one, finding his game for him, foolishly brings it up to him, does he attempt to take it from him. He does not throw cheese to dogs present at lunch-time, which may spoil their “ scent ” for the rest of the day. Indeed, he does not give food to any dog without the permission of its owner. Of his own dog, it may be said that he jealously guards its rights and interests, and, shooting over for the day, gives it

the consideration due to one that has done a hard day's work.

I like the man who carefully marks down his kills and, when the drive is over, remains quietly at his stand until keepers or pickers-up arrive, when he is able concisely to tell them where such and such a dead bird lies and the "fall" of a runner. He knows a towered bird when he sees it, watches it carefully throughout its "tower," bends low to get a better judgment of distance against the sky-line and marks it dead as between two points. Such a man as I have in mind knows a good deal about wild life and game preservation, and can identify most, if not all, species of birds seen, even at a distance. He knows many "dodges" of which he does not boast, but does his best quietly to educate younger members of the party. He does not wear a halo about his head, nor would he wish to. He is just a good sportsman and an excellent companion, unassuming and quietly humorous, the perfect guest and well worth while listening to, if only he can be "drawn out." There are many other good features of this composite sportsman which I should like to mention, but, for the time being, we must be content merely to envy him his reputation.

January 6th.

A few remarks on "specimens" of dogs noted for their good or bad habits in the shooting field. We all know the wild, half-trained animals that are brought out by their owners, when they should have been left at home. As I have said previously, a serious day's shooting is not the time to train a dog—lessons, and even experience, should come to it where they cannot interrupt or spoil other people's sport.

Many the time when shooting small coverts, this kind of scene is witnessed. A covert is beaten out and dead game lying outside collected—mostly by hand. One or two birds have fallen behind in the next covert and one or two runners are down. Somewhere in the line of guns a half-trained dog is released (probably to gather a dead bird lying in the open). In an instant it is away, and, bet your life on it,

away it goes into the next beat and up get pheasants in all directions.

To offset such a scene, let us admire the well-trained dog sitting at its master's heel, or just in front of him, watching the shooting without undue excitement, and, if a "proper old stager," marking the fall of runners only. Should the order then be to pick-up, that dog will be off like a streak, leaving well alone dead birds lying in the open.

The whining dog on a lead is irritating to neighbouring guns, and this trait is fairly easily cured. How? Well, I am of that school of thought which believes in the adage that it is sometimes necessary to "be cruel to be kind." In other words, if a dog is not of the super-sensitive sort (which all too many are to-day, thanks to the influence of the Show Bench), reasonably severe chastisement at the right time (so that the dog knows what it is being punished for) is a better and more lasting treatment than everlasting nagging.

I would deal out severe punishment to the "poaching" dog, by which term I infer the dog that cannot bear to see another picking up or carrying game, and immediately rushes upon it and tries to snatch it away, with the result that the bird gets sadly torn. A man who allows his dog to follow this trait, with only a verbal reprimand, and continues to bring it out shooting, deserves the telling-off which sometimes comes his way.

Some dogs seem to possess a veritable "flair" for getting on the heel-scent of a runner. That is, they get on to the line all right, but immediately follow the scent backwards in the direction from which the game has come. Such dogs are usually of an excitable temperament, a trait that can be eradicated by an understanding trainer.

Grand it is to watch the steady old warrior puzzling out a line on a day when scent is bad. Unhurried, using his "thinking box," he may safely be left to his work. Should his master interfere, it is often to discover that he himself is in error and the dog is right. Such a dog is a real joy to his master, and by his expressions and mannerisms he is able to convey his very thoughts to him. There are almost perfect dogs—dogs with mouths of velvet and the faculty to

use mind, brain, nose and eyes in perfect harmony. Experience, of course, forms the greater part of the reason for this perfection, but they did not obtain this except at the hand of understanding trainers able to regard matters from a dog's point of view and to build up an almost telepathic understanding between themselves and their pupils.

"Can a dog reason?" is a question often raised. The answer is "Yes," but this assertion must be qualified by the remark that it can do so only within reasonable limitations, and to a degree depending upon the manner in which its instincts have been "drawn out" and developed by its trainer. I could give many instances of dogs doing a deliberate job of useful reasoning that would confound the opinion of those who refuse to acknowledge that deliberate thought is possible in our canine friends, and who dabble too freely with the word "Instinct."

I love a good water dog, i.e., one that takes fearlessly to water in all weathers to recover his game. The retriever or spaniel that trembles on the brink deserves a toe of a boot gently applied beneath his rudder, and, as gently, a "spot of uplift"!

Shooting of any kind, without a dog, leaves me cold, yet it is difficult to understand how so many sportsmen can bring out animals to shooting parties that must be kept on a string or they run wild. Others have useless creatures that will not face thick, punishing cover and water, though, from their whines, they have some sort of instinct that prompts them. I WOULD FAR RATHER SEE A DOG MAKE A FOOL OF A SPORTSMAN THAN A SPORTSMAN MAKE A FOOL OF A DOG. Unhappily, the latter is all too often the case. Anyone bringing a boy up to the gun should see to it that his education includes lessons in dog-handling, undertaken by a competent tutor with a real understanding of the canine mind.

January 7th. (REMINISCENCE)

A full hour of darkness remained, as I dragged my old bike from the shed and set its front wheel towards the hill overlooking the river. Two and a half miles of steady drag and I reached the tin-shed. Here the bike was left under lock and key and I advanced on foot towards my

objective, swinging a stable lanthorn. Faintly, against the dark sky with its few twinkling stars I could see the little knob of beech trees that crowned the slope. Below these lay the encircling Roman encampment with its deep-cut fortifications, their sides scarred by rabbit burrows.

The previous morning I had brought five dozen traps from the wood in the valley, and, after a laborious climb, had spent until midday setting them round the hill-top. This was the second time of asking that the burrows had been trapped that season, and I looked forward to about four days of successful catches and another four days of mopping up. Soon after the traps had been set up it had begun to drizzle, and then, as now, a bitterly cold breeze from the east drove across the open ground.

In due course the first burrow was reached and my hound set himself down to watch operations. If you want to get weather-hardened I commend you to an exposed hillside just before dawn has commenced to break, with a freezing drizzle driving against you, and with traps and clay soil a sticky mess that clings to the hands and numbs them. The setting of traps and the weather had combined to keep the rabbits in their burrows, and the twenty-seven caught were not all in the most perfect condition. One or two had rolled in the wet clay and their jackets had suffered accordingly. One by one I took them by the narrow back and gently pulled them from the shelter of the holes down which they had gone to the full length of the chain. One by one I dislocated their necks, released them from the traps and sent their bodies rolling down the steep slope to the mossy turf at the bottom of the man-made entrenchment. The lanthorn, with its stub of candle, gave sufficient light to enable me to cast a ray upon each victim before entering a numbed hand into the hole, for at this spot I had previously caught two cats and a stoat, to say nothing of rats. As each captive was killed and cast down, I did my best to scrape the trap clean so that it could be quickly set up later.

I had reached the last of the burrows and was adjusting a leather knee-pad, when I chanced to look round at the eastern sky, which was already showing signs of faint colouring. I glanced casually at it, then gave a faint start.

Something quite out of the ordinary appeared to be hanging mid-way between the distant outline of hills and the sky—something which was altogether strange to the reasoning mind and accordingly sent a tiny chill feeling through an already frozen body. Was I really “seeing things?” Impossible! There must be some explanation for this unnameable thing that was obviously growing larger. At first I thought of an immense flock of plover, but, as I watched the apparition, I knew that it had no connection with Nature. Forgotten were the traps and the rabbits: forgotten the agony of aching fingers. And as I watched, spell-bound, this thing in the sky grew and grew. Then, suddenly, a faint humming sound was borne on the breeze, and a tiny light seemed to flicker on the grey-black bulk. Reason returned, as there dawned in mind the fact that I was looking at the advancing shape of an immense low-flying airship. On it came, the light of dawn growing brighter in the background. On and over it nosed its way and I had the most perfect view of one of our ill-starred ships of the air—the R.100 or the R.101, I forget which.

And so, with daylight brightening the sky and the faint hum of engines still in my ears, I returned to my task. The lantern was extinguished, the rabbits collected, legged and paunched, and, with the weight of the bundle evenly distributed over my shoulder, I started off downhill towards the hut in the wood, where yesterday’s catch was slung across poles between the walls. The catch, already hanging there, stiff and sleek, was the result of the previous night’s trapping, of the snares set in the thistle field adjoining the wood, and of an assistant’s work with nets and ferrets—over a hundred rabbits in all. Having lit the stove in the hut and got a trifle warmer, I tied the rabbits up into bundles, for shortly, now, the pony and trap would be over from a village five miles away to fetch them. Once that had departed I could return to the hill to “set-up” again before returning home to a late breakfast.

Outside the hut the breeze still moaned among the ash-poles and oaks. A jay rasped a note of inquiry, followed by one of warning. From the open door I could see the form of the pony and trap coming slowly over the hill, old Albert

huddled in the corner impatiently flicking the reins. Few words were spoken as we loaded up. It was still too cold, even in the wood, to enjoy a chat. Tom, the fat white pony, looked at me, as much as to say "Where's my bit of apple this morning?" When duly rewarded he took no further interest in life! Blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, Albert watched the direction it took, considered this for a few moments, then made room for himself among the bundled rabbits on the side where the breeze would be behind him. Laboriously he took off a thick glove, and extracted from the folds of his many clothing a much-worn wallet. Reluctantly, it seemed, he carefully thumbed four £1 notes and handed them over, then dived into his trousers pocket for the odd silver. How good, even on such a bitter morning, can be the feeling in hand of the wages of righteousness and labour and the commission of a hard-working rabbit-catcher!

January 8th.

I am asked at times if I have taken part in any really big woodcock shoots, and what sort of bags I have seen made. My reply is that I have never shot woodcock in Ireland, where record bags have their being, and that nothing over eight couple have graced the game cart at any shoot at which I have been present. I can, however, look back on some of the grandest little days that any man could wish for, when cocks and 'cock were our chief aim, and the surroundings were such that one felt oneself living in a veritable fairyland.

Among the best of these days were spent on a little shoot in Derbyshire, among the wooded hills at the edge of a famous moor. Picture one such morning as the small party wended its way up the steep hill-path to the woods. Leading was our host, astride his rough shooting pony, and, plodding beside him, his old keeper. Five guns followed, with two pickers-up in attendance, their canine charges, faithful old warriors, showing little of the excitement that I knew they felt. Picture, too, the glorious scenery—the purple light of the moors showing over the tops of the stunted oaks that clothed the steep banks; the gold and brown bracken that spread itself like a rich and ragged carpet beneath trees

and undergrowth and about the rocky boulders that strewed rides and glades alike. Fast-running springs sang their way down tip-tilted valleys, or cascaded in a riot from the high places, to form waterfalls whose sweet and evasive music entertained us at many of the stands. Here and there old stone walls, or the remnants of them, acted as boundaries for certain beats, and, far away in the distance, beyond the little villages below us, Chesterfield's crooked spire. Most fairy-like of all were the small clumps of birch, with that peculiar haze about them born of a million delicate twigs etched against a background of broken sky.

There were other occasions when those same woods seemed almost austere—the remains of heavy snow lay in patches over the bracken and upon the boughs of evergreens. A few of the oaks in the more sheltered spots still retained remnants of golden foliage, and the little springs were swollen into miniature torrents, and the voice of tearing, broken water never ceased. Even so, patches of rhododendrons, and the dark, hollow caverns formed by snow-heavy bracken, revealed the hiding place of pheasants, woodcock and rabbit, and, as owl-like forms flitted and dodged between the tree-trunks, hills and valleys echoed and re-echoed the barking of guns.

At length, more material, but, in a sense, as satisfying, came lunch, eaten in the cosy room of a cottage among the woods. There was hotch-potch and warming pies, piping hot potatoes in their jackets, cold game and bread and cheese, whisky, and home-made sloe-gin and beer. Let it not be thought, however, that such meals were on a pretentious scale, like some I have enjoyed (?) from time to time. No undue time was wasted upon them, for all were eager to return to the fray. Usually from twenty to thirty pheasants were shot, and from four to seven couple of 'cock, with perhaps a few snipe and the odd brace of partridges. Small days, these, but great days none the less.

'January 9th.

My way taking me by a flooded portion of the river—and, incidentally, into the face of a bitter north wind—I stopped for a few minutes in the shelter of a gateway to take stock

of my surroundings. Hunting down some hedgerows close to the river only the week-end before, my hound had retrieved several dead moorhen and a dozen live ones that were too weak to avoid him. They were, literally, skin and bones, and might better be described as floating breast-plates. There had been a general thaw since then, but now the hard weather had returned. The flood-water was thickly covered with ice and a few snowflakes were being driven hither and thither, to fall in a faint powdering of white over tracks visible earlier in the day.

About the pools of water in the meadows plover sat or ran disconsolately, flying up at our approach, tumbling and calling as they do about the fields in spring. Already, we had passed the partly "picked" bodies of two that had fallen easy prey to predatory hunters. On a peninsular of grass issuing from the river bank was a gathering of coot and moorhen, seemingly attempting to gain a livelihood from the hardened land. In the background, on the water itself, were several mallard and half a score of tufted duck. These little black and white fellows can be deceptive. Yestereve had come to me a sporting farmer, declaring that there were a number of black and white birds on the river much larger than mallard. They were divers, he added, and, although he had searched all his books on birds, he could not place them. I had little doubt that they were tufted, for, though smaller than mallard, they sit high upon the water, like bobbing corks, and, at a distance, can look almost twice their size. I did not have the opportunity of checking up on the particular flotilla he mentioned, but, from his description, I had little doubt in mind as to their identity.

From my observation post by the gate I watched the goings on of rooks and crows, of plover and jackdaws, of a few gulls and of odd pigeon that dropped down to drink. One sees and learns much by even such a short vigil.

I recalled to mind the conversation of the day before. There was to be a duck shoot, for mallard, wigeon and teal were now plentifully scattered about the river and floods. A duck shoot organised between a half-dozen friends during the second week in February! I had explained that, inland,

the season for this excellent sport finished with January, but my assurances had been doubted. Books and diaries had been quoted as evidence that I was in error, but those books had been printed long before the new close time for geese and duck had been settled, and the date on my own diary told the same tale. It is generally believed (even now) in the country that duck and geese may be shot until March, and many of the police seem unaware of the comparatively new regulations.

Having at length decided to move on, I left the river behind and struck out across the wintry landscape of open country. On every patch of green stuff pigeon were noted, some in large flocks, some in smaller ones, with little bands of stock doves veering off before the heavier woodies clapped up from brussel-tops and kale-heads. Verily the wily stock doves know how to look after themselves! Up they spring from the side of corn and bean ricks, from stack yards, and often enough from the entrance of barns. Shoot them and examine their crops, comparing these with those of the ring-doves. The latter are bulging with green stuff—cabbage, turnip-tops and clover, with odd ivy-berries. The former show an altogether better variety—clover, field beans, and even corn. After a really long and bitter spell of hard weather, when one could pick up dead woodies and even knock a number over with sticks, the stock-doves have remained plump and the flavour of them excellent.

Nor do the "foreign" ring-doves seem to do so well as those born and bred at home. Probably driven, after a period of starvation, from a frozen Europe, they arrive (a little smaller and dirtier than are our home-bred birds) and seem incapable of fending for themselves as well as do our own.

Hérons are another species of bird which suffer greatly during hard weather. Sometimes they get so weak and miserable that they actually get their legs frozen into the ice. Many die of starvation and it is pitiable to examine their poor remains. Fish take to deep water during cold spells; frogs vanish. It would seem, therefore, that the heron must rely chiefly on water and land voles, on moles and mice which get flooded out of their retreats and take temporary

quarters in reed-tussocks and similar cover, from which it is not difficult for the spear-billed fisher to oust them. Only the predatory hook-beaked birds of the hawk tribe appear to do themselves well under such agonising conditions.

January 10th.

The marsh lay quiet under a weak December sun. Two grey wings of water spread out on either side of the flooded lane, with its tall whitethorn hedges. The frost of the previous night had left a thin coating of ice on the surface of the water, through which rose patches of decayed reeds, but a thaw had already started, as the drip from the willows gave evidence. Even to those well acquainted with the place the marsh presents difficulties in time of flood. The usual gaps in the surrounding hedges, the narrow "jumps" across the ditches, the plank bridges over the dykes—most become unusable, and the method of approach, to say nothing of that of walking the place for duck and snipe, offers a real problem, and sometimes one which results in a ducking for the shooter.

On this particular morning I had started out alone, except for the presence of the hound, for I had a smug feeling that I should do better on my own, and that, before many hours, I should return to the inn above the marsh with a bag which would make my name a memory for ever! I had arranged, however, for a companion to meet me at the inn for lunch and to help me walk up snipe in the afternoon and share with me the doubtful glories of fighting at dusk. Even as I approached the edge of the first reed-meadow I could not refrain from thinking of the room I had booked at the inn; of the large fire I had ordered, and of the roast chicken which mine host had been specially asked to prepare.

Hardly had I negotiated the narrow dyke over which a heavy sleeper, now well awash, had been fixed, than I spied two teal dive down among the cover of decayed rushes on the edge of a pool of flood-water. Slowly, very slowly, I walked towards the spot, and carefully, well aware that a stalk was in progress, the hound moved quietly at heel. I had expected the teal to make towards the water's edge

after landing, but to my surprise they sprang up nearly twenty yards "inland" from the pool, one going away to the right, the other to the left. Taking the bird on the left first, I watched it falling and swung round to let drive at the second. This also received my shot, but fell winged. As a rule, the hound would have remained at heel, but on this occasion, probably mistaking the oath I swore as I winged my bird for an order, he was away after the dead duck, despite my roars for him to get after the runner. There was only one thing to do—go after it myself. It was not worth another shot, for there could be no escape for it—at least, that is what I thought. Gaining rapidly on it, I then noticed that from the edge of the water to which it was making there ran a drain, and I knew then that if it reached it I might easily lose my bird. True, I ought to have loaded and given it a shot, but still I thought I could beat it to the water. Right on the edge of the dyke I made my pounce, and at that moment the toe of my boot stubbed a reed-tussock and next instant I was floundering in the drain, my waders nicely filling, over a hundred and fifty cartridges well below water-line, and my gun choked with mud. Moreover, the temperature caused by walking in winter clothes and well loaded for the occasion had suddenly changed to that associated with submersion in ice-cold water.

It was a fortnight later that I found my bird, and it was in excellent order, but it was within ten minutes, after I had emptied boots and cartridge bag of water, and cleaned some of the mud from my face and hands, that I started back to the inn, less jubilant than when I had set out twenty minutes previously. However, you cannot keep a good man down, and, though I started out half-an-hour later dressed in the borrowed clothes of a landlord half my size, and with a hundred cartridges borrowed from a local farmer, my enthusiasm had returned, and a glow burned in my body, where lay a majestic portion of grog "brewed" by mine host.

Having searched for a time for the missing hen teal, I set out for the far end of the marsh, where there was not so much water and where the chance of getting a shot at duck



DOGS TRAINED AND UNTRAINED
“ . . . dogs with mouths of velvet.”



PIGEON DRIVE

“ . . . came spinning earthwards like a falling leaf ”

and snipe seemed more likely. I did, in fact, kill four mallard in four shots from a quiet lay-by in an otherwise fast-running brook, and, in the course of my travels, accounted for seven and a half couple of snipe, but in more than seven and a half couple of shots! Another teal, a single bird that made a sudden appearance over my head, and two pigeon made up the morning's bag—a much smaller one than I had expected. The seven geese I had seen on the water the day before had departed, and my shooting at the duck on the brook had put about forty mallard off a patch of flood-water behind a hedge, and these had made a bee-line for safer quarters. Now I returned once again towards the inn, an old pair of shoes borrowed from the landlord's son squelching as I walked, but with my heart light at the thoughts of the fire and my favourite dish.

After lunch we ambled down to the marsh again. It was already beginning to freeze, and thousands of plover had arrived from the surrounding farmlands and were to be seen standing knee-deep in water round the edge of the pools. Before we took up our stands for the evening flight of duck we managed to kill, mostly by driving them towards each other, eleven more snipe, including five jack. And my friend floored an old crow which, watching and laughing at me, came over his ambush.

The flight that evening was poor, for we collected only two duck, and one of these was a "runner" which it took us twenty minutes or so to gather, but such days were numerous and pleasant, and many, too, were the moonlight nights with a background of floating cloudbanks on which we "tickled up" the duck, returning home cold, tired, but generally elated.

January 11th.

A friend said to me, during the first week in January, "Come over to my place this afternoon and have a go at the duck. I can't be there myself, but J—— will be with you. There were hundreds of duck on the flood pools last night, and you may find on odd pheasant in the 'rod-eight' (pronounced 'rod-dy')." "Right," I replied, "I'll be there."

Sharp at 2 o'clock I was at the farm and met J——. A

short discussion followed and a decision was made to go down to the river via a certain hedge. Arrived on the bank, we regarded the flooded willow-bed opposite, when, almost at once, a score of mallard rose from among the trees and made away. "Get into that gap among the willows behind me," I said to my companion, who had done little shooting, "while I wait by the river-gate." No sooner had we concealed ourselves than two mallard were seen coming straight towards us, very high up. Behind them came a single bird, at lower altitude, and as he came over I gave him a barrel that winged him and he went down with a splash in the willows opposite. "Go to it," I said to the hound, he having marked the fall. Into the river he went, but so fast was the current that he landed on the far bank, sixty yards over, well below where the bird had fallen. For twenty minutes he hunted the winged duck, but that hardy bird made use of tree and stump to dive and avoid capture. Then, a pigeon coming over, I downed it, and the hound, seeing the splash in mid-river, swam out from the opposite bank and presently brought his "game" to hand.

After a bit, we walked up the river, intending to kill a few coot on a flooded ditch half-a-mile away. Arriving at the spot, there was no coot to be seen, but two duck rose from a fringe of reeds, and I downed the mallard. On our return to the scene of the first shots, we noted a number of teal on some flood-water, but also, much to my surprise, a fairish number of wigeon. My absent host had spoken to me of the presence of what he called "whistling duck," but I had not suspected this species. However, it was impossible to get near them, and I told my companion that we should be able to have a go at them at dusk, as they would probably return to the pool.

We now made a long pilgrimage downstream, but except for a shot at snipe, and the flushing of a nice spring of teal, we had no luck, although we did glean a partridge which flew into telegraph wires and crashed into a flooded gravel pit. There were, in fact, five of these pits, the water in them black and ruffled under a threatening sky. Too deep and with no mud for duck, they are always drawn blank,

although I have heard duck splashing down on them in the dark.

“ And now,” I said, “ let us try the little ‘ roddy ’ before we wait for the evening flight.” This we did, and the half-acre yielded, most surprisingly, four cock pheasants and a hen. Another hen went away unshot at.

The evening flight looked like being a complete failure. I stood by the river-gate straining eyes into the fading colours in the west, but no duck came, and the pigeon were homeward bound towards the big wood in the distance, along a line which was far out of shot of our stand. The river swirled and dimpled at my feet, angry in its fulness. The tracery of naked willows showed black against the background of a greying sky. Moorhen croaked as they crossed the swift current, or flew from the opposite bank to their roost. Two coveys of partridges, after loud and insistent calling, presently left the meadows over the river and came flying over our heads, to settle on higher ground among the kale.

I had almost given up hope of getting another shot, when a black spectre, like the darting shadow of plover, came out of the west, and was almost over the river when a “ whee-oo—whee-oo !” marshalled all my senses. The wigeon were returning to the pool. And here’s technique for you ! In a flash I gave the spearhead of the birds a lead in accordance with the great speed at which they were travelling, and pressed the second trigger almost in the same movement. From that whistling flock, the grand, wild music of which reminded me of coastal days, there fell three cocks and a hen—three into the river and one on to the meadow. It was ten minutes or more before, from the swift current, the hound had gathered the dead, and my companion, who had never in his life seen a wigeon, “ gathered round ” to view the spoils. We might have had another duck, for one crossed over in the rapidly growing dusk, but just at the moment when I had caught the net of my game bag in a strand of barbed wire.

I had, in fact, been wading from ankle- to waist-deep during the afternoon, in order to reach this and that piece of ground above flood-level. My legs were numb, but what

matter—that on such an afternoon? There had been the possibility (a very remote one indeed) of finding a pheasant, and, lo and behold, we had five! We had hoped (rather against hope) to shoot, say, a couple of mallard, and we had one bird and, in addition, four wigeon, a pigeon, a snipe and a partridge. Also two of a species which shall be nameless, but of which there need be no stirring of the conscience! “To finish the season” is a phrase better known to hunting men, but this evening it seemed to apply only too well to our fortunate efforts. Certainly, in all my experiences, and they have been many and varied, that Friday afternoon of a January day will remain a red-letter half-day.

January 12th.

Despite cold winds and frosts, there have been several evenings during the past fortnight that could not be described otherwise than “spring-like.” It is on evenings of this kind that one can enjoy, in every sense, waiting for the pigeon coming in to roost from their feeding grounds.

It was late afternoon when I posted myself in quite a small ash plantation below a line of elms in which rooks were rebuilding old nests. A dozen guns had gone on to the big wood, some half-dozen to a smaller wood a mile distant, while one or two old stagers like myself, who know the country well, had taken up posts in spinneys and beside high hedgerows into which we knew the pigeon were likely to drop when disturbed by continual firing.

During the afternoon we had seen two big flocks feeding in a grey carpet about the river meadows. Smaller lots were observed on some newly-sown ground to the west of the wood, while several more flocks were reported by guns that had arrived by car to join the party. All seemed set for a successful shoot, but inwardly I felt glad to be away from the main body of guns, for I knew there would be shooting at extreme ranges that would tend only to scare off the birds and spoil sport generally. I do not say this in a spirit of smugness, but merely as a fact, and one which will be instantly corroborated by anyone who, keen to make a good bag, has suffered from this kind of foolish behaviour. Also,

in an isolated station, one can take shots at single birds passing over without disturbing acres of wood, and when one sees a large flock approaching, obviously bound for the woods, one can withhold one's fire and so give other guns the chance of shooting.

Truly it was a lovely evening! There was no wind at all, but this would not matter so far as sport was concerned. Pigeon might come in high, but they would circle lower and lower towards their roosting place. All round me blackbirds and thrushes were singing, and the ceaseless conversation of the rooks, busy about their domestic affairs, seemed part of the spirit of rural life. On the steep hillside that towered skywards on my right rabbits were sitting at the mouths of their holes, enjoying the fading warmth of the western sun. Silhouetted on the brow five hares were engaged in chasing one another in small circles, every now and again rising on their hinds legs to spar.

The first pigeon to put in an appearance were almost overhead when I spotted them; they were flying slowly and comparatively low and both came crashing down through the ash poles, snapping off a number of small brittle branches as they fell. A simple enough shot, but eminently satisfactory none the less. At the first report the rooks, some of which had been flying round, suspicious of the presence of man below their nests, sheered off with calls of alarm, and two, arriving at the trees just ahead of the pigeon, almost swerved into the contents of the second barrel. On the hillside the hares stopped dead in their tracks, their ears pricked, prepared to gallop off at a split second's notice. The rabbits, too, seemed carved in stone; one or two of the more cautious had immediately disappeared down their burrows, but others, no doubt with a better sense of sound and distance, anxiously awaited further developments.

I had just time to note these things when several more pigeon, disturbed from nearby trees, headed towards the copse, flying slowly but ready to divert their course at the first sign of movement below them. Keeping the whiteness of my face well in the shade of the brim of my hat, and raising the gun barrels carefully, I caught one full in the

crop, and he came spinning earthwards like a falling autumn leaf. The second barrel almost lopped a sturdy ash pole and the prospective victim trod on the gas with a vengeance.

By now spasmodic shooting could be heard coming from the direction of the big wood, and once an immense flock of pigeon passed over me, well out of range, the whisper of their wings lasting for half-a-minute. Someone, judging by a double shot, had "banged into them" before they had time to settle, and now they were heading away from the danger point, and also in the wrong direction for the smaller wood.

Gathering your pigeon without a dog is poor fun and it is surprising how far a winged pigeon will walk in next to no time. I searched in wide circles for the fallen bird; tracked it by a few loose feathers into a ditch; followed the course of the ditch for a hundred yards and finally had to sprint to overtake a walking pigeon. Even then, I was forced to fall on my knees to catch it, and one knee sank uncomfortably in the mire.

I do not know how many pigeon were killed that evening, as I had to make tracks before the party returned. Judging by the shooting, I know about how many should have been killed, but these big-wood affairs often produce about a dozen birds to a couple of hundred or more cartridges fired! A little more thought by individual members of the party, or a lecture by the O.C. before the start, might bring about the killing of four times as many birds and more to that number of cartridges. Pamphlets have been issued and articles innumerable written on the commonsense technique that should be adopted at these organised shoots. But are they adopted? Not on your life! Too much anxiety is shown towards the making of individual bags. Too much ignorance is shown as to the killing power of cartridges. Too little understanding is shown as regards allowing flocks almost, if not quite, to settle, and then pasting them good and plenty before they are out of range. Hosts should weed out offenders and forget to ask them to weekly or fortnightly gatherings. They do more harm than good, spoiling sport for others and defeating the very object of pigeon drives. Men keen on the sport and

willing to be useful sicken of the behaviour of these chronic offenders and take their guns and cartridges elsewhere. And I do not blame them.

January 13th.

Down in the water-meadows, that were so recently covered by flood-water, the stench of rotting and drying vegetation is strong. Many people turn up their noses at it, but I must confess that it is one of those scents which, for some strange reason, I enjoy. But then I enjoy also the smell of a pig-yard and that of carted manure; the peculiar scent that issues from a rookery in May; the scent of kennels; even that of a fox earth that is not spoiled by the stink of garbage. Every wildfowler knows that strange sense of suppressed excitement that comes to him when he gets in breathing range of an estuary, and the scent of salt water, mud and what-not on a river when the tide is out. The "aroma" that hangs about inland marshes and water-meadows after a flood is very similar, and to the inland duck and snipe shooter is no less potent with excitement and anticipation.

Reed-tussocks and grass are now a dirty brown, and will remain so until rain eventually washes away the silt left by the receding floods. Such areas become alive with bird-life. Plover leave the fallows and the fields of springing wheat and run gaily about the low meadows, evidently finding much to suit their fancy. Pigeon resort there, more particularly in the morning, and some of those I have shot had evidently been doing themselves well on small snails, for there were scores of them in each crop. No doubt the snails themselves form some nourishment, while the shells act as fine grit. Starling flocks that settle on the springing corn and nip off the shoots, leaving them lying on the ground in thousands, spend much time also among the reed-tussocks, for the flood-water has left all manner of minute foodstuff on the surface, and this is combed by the gossiping flocks. Larks, also sinners in nipping off the corn-shoots, visit the lower ground, and many a lark and many a pipit sets the snipe-shooter's nerves on edge as it rises with a shrill note. Especially is this the case as dusk descends, for these birds much resemble a snipe, though they do not show that

flash of white that we all love to see. Rooks and jackdaws, particularly early in the mornings, strut about the meadows, the jackdaws also interesting themselves in the few scattered sheep, searching them for ticks and even sitting on their heads for cranium examination.

Damp and unused seem the molehills, and one wonders what tragedies have occurred beneath the surface of the ground. Countless moles seem to have an instinctive knowledge when flooding is about to take place. Probably water slowly rising under the surface may warn them; they must, too, find plenty of worms as these are driven upwards. Yet I have seen an island of grass, as the floods rose, slowly becoming submerged, while it was obvious, by newly-thrown-up mole-heaps and runs that some moles at least must drown or swim for it.

Once, after the floods had gone down, I was walking across an orchard when I noticed a mole-run nearly twenty-five yards in length which ended at the foot of an apple tree and had apparently been made by a mole escaping before the rising water. The highest ground on what was then an island was round the trunk of the tree itself, and here I came across a dead mole half in the ground and half out, with its front paws and nose against the tree, in an attitude of prayer. I doubt, though, if many moles are drowned underground, for I imagine they would come to the surface as the water rose and there end their last minutes. Crows, rooks, owls, etc. (possibly even moorhen), find the bodies and remove them for their own ends.

Perhaps the greatest mole-hunters of the marshes and lowland meadows are the short-eared owls, or grass-owls. Where you find these birds, there also will you discover the remains of moles in seats, or at spots from which the birds have been flushed. Often they carry off the mole when they are disturbed, but do not travel far with their burdens.

Incidentally, I recently saw a letter in a sporting paper that stated that the writer had found a short-eared owl roosting in a thorn bush on his marsh and he considered it a most unusual thing. Some seasons ago I could have taken him to a single whitethorn bush on a marsh in which roosted five of these owls. Disturbed, they would flap out and each

make off to a fencing post it knew, remaining (apparently part of the post) until we had passed on, and then return with all haste to the bush. These owls played havoc with my snipe, killing many, but scaring away the majority from the marsh. What did I do about it? That is my business, but it was not long before I was killing from a dozen to thirty snipe in a day.

The snipe have now returned to the water-meadows, but, since all the ground is soft, they lie scattered about the place. Only in odd bits of suitable cover, in which they lie up by day, can one be certain, by careful stalking, of putting up a dozen or more birds at a time. It is difficult to walk quietly across the slush, and every now and again one's boots or shoes make a squelching sound like the call of a rising snipe. One swings round, only to find that he has pulled his own leg!

It is uncomfortable to walk in bare feet, and darned cold, but I recently made the experiment when stalking a dry clump of rushes in which there had been over thirty snipe on the previous day. I found that bare feet make less noise than boots or shoes, but I also discovered that I had cut myself in three places on the rough edges of grass or rush, and that, even when walking a distance, it was almost impossible to keep the feet from getting numb.

In the present state of the marsh and meadows, coot and moorhen roam far from the river and brook. One flushes them from hedgerows and springs, but only in a high wind do they present shots worth taking. I once shot through a tall hedge at a fairly high coot, only to find that I had mistaken its head for its tail and given it a fairish "lead" (or poke) behind. Sounds funny, I know, but the incident occurred in moonlight and as a flock of diving plover formed a background to my target.

January 18th.

Came a tap at the door. Without stood a small girl. She came with a telephone message from a big house nearby (*Note*: I do dislike being rung up on other people's 'phones, or using them, except in emergency). Would I come over to shoot that afternoon at a place seven miles distant?

There was no answer, as it was taken for granted that I would! After a morning of labour, which included many miles on that hated machine, the push-bike, I had hoped to sit down and fish at leisure for the odd piece of steak in a casserole swimming with vegetables and gravy. Now, orders being orders, I made a hasty repast and mounted once more the steadfast steed.

The programme was a simple one. One or two hedges would be hunted out by two of us (or, rather, by the dogs), when we would continue to the last "drive" of the long wood, kill a few rabbits and then settle down to strafe the pigeon coming in to roost. "Pheasants?" I queried. "Cocks, yes," replied my companion, and two of these gaudy fellows fell to my gun in the first hedgerow, and one to my neighbour in the second. We also collected five rabbits before reaching the wood, two of which were pushed from grass-tussocks in the meadow by my hound and scuttled themselves when I pressed the trigger on them as they dashed for the hedge. In the end bit of wood we accounted for four rabbits, one pheasant, a jay and two grey squirrels. The latter seemed dazed and were probably roaming about in a state of "intoxication" brought about by semi-hibernation.

The real fun of the day started after we had taken up position in the wood to wait on the pigeon. My companion placed himself under a small clump of oaks among the ash-poles, and I wandered four hundred yards away and stood on the edge of the wood facing the distant downs. Here were half-a-dozen elms in which the pigeon always settled before daring the possible dangers of the wood.

Quite twenty minutes passed without a shot being fired, and not a pigeon did I see against the wide expanse of sky before me. Then, suddenly, I heard a bird settle behind me, and, turning cautiously, beheld two stock doves on an ash, both apparently unworried about a likely ambush—obviously young birds with quite a lot to learn. In fact, I know they were young birds, because I took them home and cooked them. Their crops were full of barley.

Ten minutes more of patient waiting, what time a lesser spotted woodpecker paid a visit to one of the elms, and

hammered hard on the broken bark of a dead limb, and a small school of fieldfares settled in the highest branches. Then, from the distance of the downs, silhouetted in sharp relief against the evening sky, came the distant echo of a double shot. Straining my eyes in that direction, I presently saw what I at first took to be an immense flock of starlings, but, surprisingly, this flock turned out to be pigeon—obviously “foreign” migrants newly, or recently, arrived over these shores. The manner of their progress revealed what they were, even while they were still afar off. For a time they headed in our direction, but, when still half a mile away, took a turn towards the north, and I judged they would pass over, or settle in, a certain large wood. Later I heard that they settled there for the night, but passed on in the morning.

There were other pigeon, however, that had ideas of their own, and close on fifty made for my elms and came dropping into them, when I accounted for two sitters with the first barrel and a “runner” (picked up later) with the second. My companion had two on wing as they passed over his stand. Four years ago, when I had last stood in this wood with the same keen young shot, we killed forty-four birds between us in the short period between twilight and dark. There had been a heavy storm and a high wind on that occasion and many of the birds were slaughtered as they settled among the trees in the half-light. On this occasion we gathered only twelve, but, except for four “sitters” the shooting was at high targets flying slowly over in a dead calm. And such birds take a bit of judging.

As we left the wood a sparrow-hawk was seen to be coming our way, but it flew wide and made for a batch of four firs in the centre of the covert. Dropping our load, we went back to deal with it. Having stalked the trees until we came beneath them, I rapped on the trunk with the remains of an old broken-down vermin pole, and, after a bit, our quarry made a bolt for it, being handsomely missed with three barrels. “Rotten shot,” I remarked loudly, pretending that I had not fired at the little hawk, but my companion, whom I had brought up to the tricks of

the trade, took note that I had made at least one attempt to wipe his eye!

As we neared the farm, both now unloaded, a single pigeon clattered from some kale almost at our feet—probably a sick and sorry one on the way to recovery. Four hours later, as I trod the pedals, with my front lamp pointing towards home, it began to drizzle, and a steady downpour followed, so that before I reached the cottage I was soaked almost to the skin. Happily, we old crusaders are used to such reverses.

January 21st.

(Recorded three weeks after the event)

“When you’ve finished shooting pigeon,” said my naval friend at whose house I called, greatly daring, to borrow a box of cartridges, “put on something warm and come and have a go at the duck. I’ll be here at 4 o’clock, and that should give us time to have a walk round the river meadows before they start fighting.” “Good,” I replied, “I shall probably want to ‘cadge’ a few more cartridges by then!”

Punctually at 4 o’clock I arrived at the house, to find our sailor snoring on the sofa with his newly-wed wife frowning over a jig-saw puzzle on a table beside a roaring fire. “Don’t wake him for a minute,” I whispered, giving a wink at the decanter on the cocktail cabinet in the corner of the room; “let us drink to his happy dreams and to the good future of you both!” This feat accomplished, we roused the sleeper and stirred him into life. “Will you have a spot of something before we go?” he asked, politely. I accepted, and ten minutes later we had ungaraged the car, and he, the foreman of the farm and myself were on our way to the river.

The plan of campaign was simple. Navy and I melted into the cover of a thorn hedge that ran at right-angles to the water, while Foreman went off with the object of walking down a mile or so of tow-path towards us. Snow covered the frozen pools of flood-water on the meadows and a powdering of it fell gently from the sky. Already it was beginning to freeze and I watched Navy blowing into his

mittened hands. At my heels sat my hound eagerly scanning the landscape—ready for anything. At long last Navy gave a whistle, to call my attention to eight duck which had risen from the water far down the river and were making in our direction. Unfortunately, they swung round when still two hundred yards from our hedge, but we noted two tufted sailing out into the open from the cover of some willows ahead. Two more duck got up as Foreman came in sight, but seemed reluctant to offer us a shot and presently flew off in the direction taken by the others. Foreman came up, mildly cursing. It seemed that a lady had been skating all on her own on a patch of frozen flood-water in sight of the bend in the river where many duck should have been found.

Thereafter, we spread out along the bank, to wait for duck that flighted in at dusk from various lakes and lay-bys. There was little cover, and the only spot I could find was a patch of frozen mud and ice behind a bed of short decayed rushes. It was necessary to lie flat on this and to keep the hound, fleas or no fleas, in a similar position and close against me, so that we could fit into the small hollow in the foot-high bank. After ten minutes had passed, a single mallard came flying over, did a half circle, then planed towards the water. As it came in I gave it a barrel and it dropped with a splash under the opposite bank—sixty yards away. Over swam the hound, and back he came with the spoils.

Tucked up against me once more, he set to shivering, and the dampness from him oozed through my coat. A quarter of an hour and his teeth began to chatter horribly, but presently stopped, and soon after about forty duck, split up into several lots, circled overhead and came falling in around us. Something, however, caught their eye, and they shot upwards and as they passed over Foreman he gave them both barrels, for which action I inwardly cursed him. Away went the full company and we waited almost in vain until it was too dark to see more.

I say "almost in vain" advisedly, for we did get two more duck. As dusk deepened and a half-moon brightened in a cloud-swept sky, making a perfect "background" for

shooting, two duck landed on the water a hundred and fifty yards from where we lay. Keenly the hound watched them and his shiverings from the cold increased with the shiverings of excitement. Across the water the tracery of willows stood out boldly against a silvery sky. Moorhen were sailing from the opposite bank to their "roost" on our side. A lonely bomber droned by, its navigation lights like coloured stars in the firmament. At last came a quack from the duck and two birds rose from the water and made straight at us—straight as a Sunday dinner! Good work, hound, for the freezing water could not deter you, nor the ice that formed over your curls worry you one atom!

CHAPTER II.

REQUIEM.

ALREADY, as the days slowly lengthen, there are signs of spring in the air. In the cawing of rooks, as they leave their nightly roost at daybreak, is a new tone, and they have a great deal more to say for themselves. The other morning, having been asked by a farmer to kill a rook for him to hang up in the fields, I stood in ambush round a corner of my cottage. One meadow away a long straggling line of noisy birds reached from the east to the west as far as the eye could see. Sometimes they flight right over my cottage; at other times (this being dependent on the direction of their feeding-ground from their places of roost) they are well out of range, as was the case on this morning. Even so, there is often a single bird or a small party that does not keep on the line of flight, choosing to be partly independent of the rest of the black battalions, or following the flight of those hangers on, the jackdaws. On this occasion there presently approached a good flock of 'daws and two rooks. Waiting for the former to get overhead, I shot at two crossing birds, killing them both and getting a swerving rook with

the second barrel. There's nothing like a steady hand first thing in the morning, my masters !

There was, however, a good deal of sadness in my heart when I was forced to retrieve my own kill. It is a queer, and not at all a pleasant sensation, when you have had a dog to do all the " dirty " work for you for fourteen years to have lost him and to find you must now be your own retriever. You shoot, watch your birds fall—and then, somehow, things seem all wrong. You do, or at least I do, feel like leaving the slain to the rats, chucking the gun into the nearest shrubbery and clearing off somewhere for the day, miles from the usual haunts. However, the rough must be taken with the smooth, and fortunately we country-men especially are used to taking our share of the rough.

On the same morning my lawful occasions took me for several miles across-country, some of the way lying beside a brook. It was still early day when I reached the water-side, and quite a number of pigeon were sitting about the willows. In a bend of the brook I walked almost on to five mallard and raised my stick in a nice right and left. Again came that horrible sense of loss; supposing I had had my gun with me instead of an ash-plant, and had floored two of those duck, how should I have reached them? The stream at this point is wide and the overhanging branches of willows had been lopped when the brook itself was recently dredged. The nearest bridge is a good half-mile away. I swung my stick in vexation, nearly decapitating a wagtail that flew up from the mud below me. I felt like sitting down and having a good, honest cry.

All the way across those fields things kept occurring to add to my sense of loss. I tried to keep my mind on matters about me and forget the old dog that ought to be at heel or interesting himself in the thistle-clumps. I watched the rooks and the pigeon sitting on the wires of the hideous grid that disfigures the otherwise pleasant fields and pastures; they had their eyes on me, and when, presently, I clapped my hands and raised the stick, some of the more cautious flew off. Several hares were lolloping about, two already considering the possibilities of matrimony. Plover

strutted or ran about a damp portion of sown ground—a flock of at least three hundred birds. Here beside this rough foot-track were occupied rat burrows. Why these rodents still live in an open position in a wide stretch of country across which cold winds and driving rains sweep is better known to themselves. One would imagine their choice should be the barns and corn-ricks, with the warmth, shelter and food they contain. Yet somehow it seems to me that rats are either changing their habits, or becoming so numerous that they cannot all stay about the farms.

Some years ago in winter it was a comparatively rare thing to find burrows showing rat "traffic" miles from the farms and beside the banks of streams. To-day, many of the rat population seem to be satisfied with the wide open spaces. Along the brooks they have taken up their abode in the holes of water-voles, and seem every bit at home as the latter in the water. Incidentally, I think they must have driven the original residents away, unless some disease has made inroads among them. On several streams I know, water-voles used to be common enough: now for every one seen you will find three or four land rats.

But where is the fun of walking along a brook without a dog—a dog that investigates every withered rush-bed and every rat hole, bolting a moorhen here and a rat there; here a duck and there, maybe, a dabchick? An old willow stands beside the water, with a hole in the bottom of its trunk from which newly-scratched rotten wood has been drawn. A rabbit? Possibly. Or perhaps a rat. There is just a chance that here lies a travelling otter. There is no dog, however, to tell you if whatever has been busy there is at home. And if you ram in your stick and rattle it, and something does bolt, you have no companion to kill a rat or watch with unfeigned interest the departure of a rabbit. The joy has gone out of you for such innocent games.

To some men a dog is just a dog and nothing more. To others, and especially to those who are about the woods and fields day in and day out, and often during the night, a dog can mean a very great deal, and when his all too short life is ended, even though it be spring, winter seems to have invaded the countryside—a winter cold and bleak. Neither

are these few words, written at random, intended to convey a sloppy sentiment. There will be another dog shortly, to be trained for the season to come. In a year or two memory of the old love, though little faded, will be overshadowed, I hope, by the brilliance of a new performer, himself by then steady and the pride of his master. Dogs stay with us for all too short a span—so short, in fact, as to be almost heart-breaking. That's the devil of dogs—real good dogs.

February 8th.

A friend called on me one evening last week and asked me if I would bring along the ferrets next day, as certain farm buildings of his were "alive with rats."

"No, I will not," I replied promptly. "I am not going to use good rabbiting ferrets for rats, and, in any case, they would be too large to get down many of the holes. However, I know a fellow who has some good ratting ferrets and I will see him to-night, and I hope to be with you at 9 o'clock to-morrow. If I don't come, you will know that I couldn't borrow, beg or 'lift' the ferrets."

My nocturnal mission having been successful, I arrived at my friend's house on time, and together we made our way across two meadows to the buildings in question. A brick-and-slate barn of comparatively modern construction, with half the floor of wood, and the other half of bricks, was the main building. Off this was a stable, and beyond an open shelter connected with a line of pigsties. There was certainly evidence of rats in plenty; indeed, as I looked over the side of a sty in which a large sow was sleeping with one eye open, a proper twister jumped from the iron trough and disappeared down a hole. It would have been dangerous to attempt a shot, even with the little .410 with which I was armed. That rat could stay put for a bit.

We should start, I suggested, in the barn, where rats that we were unable to deal with would probably make their escape into the stables and sties, where there was a better chance of shooting them. I will admit that when I am ferreting barns and sheds of this kind I prefer to know them—to know the "runs" of rats and so plan accordingly. However, in this case the buildings were strange to me, and,

somehow, when one has spent a lifetime at such sport one does not rely too much on other people's views! To-day, my friend, although the buildings were his and he knew a lot about the habits of the tenant rats, asked me to work the ferrets and instruct him. This was very nice of him, and I much appreciated the compliment.

I entered two ferrets at different spots under the wooden part of the floor, and then stood back and waited. Nearly five minutes passed before we either heard or saw any movement. Then like a stroke of magic, a half-grown rat appeared in a dark corner. I did not see it emerge from a hole. It just appeared and sat on the boards, looking a little dazed. I winked at T., my companion, but neither of us moved another muscle. For a full minute the young rat sat there, then scurried across the floor, where I bowled it over before T. could shoot.

There were few holes outside the barn, other than those which had an entry to the stables, and so we just stood still and waited. As, after some time, nothing appeared to be moving, we crept to different points of the wooden flooring and knelt down to listen. Not a sound. I tried another spot and there could hear a ferret feeding. Then we got busy. With the aid of a crowbar we eventually managed to prize up a thin plank that broke off short where it was nailed to a cross-beam, and here luck was with us. Both ferrets were enjoying what remained of another half-grown rat. Leaving this side of the barn, we now tried the holes under the brick portion of the floor. T. went outside, where there was one open hole, and presently I heard him shoot, and then utter a bad word. A few minutes later he shouted that he had picked up one of the ferrets, and asked if he should put it in again. "No," I replied. "We'll get out of here as soon as we can find the second ferret and try the stable. In fact, we did not pick up the second ferret until an hour later, when, returning to the barn, I found it covered with blood (rat's blood) and with a nasty bite on the side of its face. This I doctored and returned the patient to its box.

I had brought over four ferrets, and we tried two fresh ones in the stable. The dog told us that there was a rat

behind the back of the manger and, by standing in the manger and banging the back with the heel of my boot, I managed to bolt it, and T. shot it as it ran across the floor—a real old stager. Between the manger and a chaff bin there was about four yards of boards, four feet in height, nailed to the wall, and here the dog again pointed a rat. We banged those boards until that rat must have suffered from headache, and we heard it scuffling about, but bolt it would not. One of the ferrets entered, however, did the job in no time and two rats came out almost together, one running along under the manger, the other climbing a corner beam and obviously making for the loft, via the hay-rack. The former fell to the dog, the latter to a double shot. We had one more rat in the stable, this descending from the loft into the chaff-bin and falling to T.'s shot.

And so to the piggery, where we removed the inhabitants into three empty sties at the far end. Here the fun became fast and furious for a short time. The rats bolted well, T. shooting four that showed up behind the wall on the far side, while I managed to kill seven rats and a mouse. The burrows were shallow and seemed to be used more for temporary accommodation while the rats fed from the trough, returning to the stables and barns to sleep (if rats ever sleep!).

I should like to devote a paragraph to each rat killed, but this cannot be. I will add, however, that the smallest member of the morning's bag, the mouse, was shot more for a joke than anything else. It seemed that a ferret above ground routed it out of the straw of the sty. Looking exceedingly startled, it galloped across the outer yard, then remained still to consider the situation. Its ears and whiskers working hard, it saw the ferret snaking towards it, when it fairly bounded between the rails and started off across the yard, which must have seemed like a huge desert to it. I did not feel like going in pursuit, so I gave it a charge of No. 6 shot, and, on walking over to retrieve it to show to T., I discovered I had ridded the farm of a prospective family of mice. A small incident this latter, and perhaps not worth relating, but it is these little incidents which brighten up more serious sport.

February 12th.

There is one thing that strikes me about the average would-be pigeon shooter—his apparent ignorance, or indifference, to the feeding habits of the birds and the local lay-out of crops. The successful pigeon shooter not only makes a study of the “topical” feeding ground of the birds, but fully realises that, when this ground is “cleared”, or deserted by the pigeon, they will obviously be busy on certain other ground. Every would-be pigeon shooter should have at least a rough idea of what pigeon feed on, their preference to certain crops over others, and the dates when such and such a crop are likely to be attacked.

All this knowledge, of course, is not easily obtained by strangers to a neighbourhood, but detailed information should be solicited. For instance, a man may discover the perfect flight-line between two harvest-fields, killing, say, fifty to sixty birds in a day—less if he is a poor, or only medium, shot; more if he is an expert. This man, perhaps, filled with enthusiasm, writes to a friend and asks him to come down and join him in some excellent sport. His friend arrives and the two take up positions along the line of flight where good bags have been accounted for. In the meantime, either one or the other feeding ground between which the birds flighted has been deserted and the two men have to be contented with a morning and afternoon yielding, say, only a dozen birds, or less.

Over a wider review of pigeon shooting, an even more intimate knowledge of the countryside is necessary. Great importance should be attached to making a study of the food of pigeon, and, where possible, a diary kept of the approximate dates when they are likely to attack specified crops. In summer there are the corn crops—“laid,” or harvested. Also fields of “spilled” beans and peas. Such are attacked by our home-bred birds—young pigeon, through lack of experience, being particularly easy to account for. Newly-planted kale and cabbage are also attacked and their tops eaten, and when the corn has been carted the birds will descend on open stubble, searching for dropped grain, weed-seeds and the leaves of young clover. By late October, small flocks have joined up and

early droves of "foreign" pigeon have arrived from over the North Sea, and the pigeon-shooter begins to think in terms of acorns, beech-mast and sweet-chestnuts in connection with the feeding birds. The larger flocks of migrants from overseas arrive in late autumn and early winter, after having suffered possible privation as winter has descended on their breeding grounds in northern Europe and Asia, and they arrive here to find that most of the acorns and beech-mast have been cleared up, and maybe hard weather has already set in over the British Isles. Then it is that the valuable green crops of farmer and market-gardener suffer, and those acquainted with fields completely stripped by the pigeon pest know what that means! Turnip-tops, clover, and all manner of green stuff are raided, despite the varied menu of the birds, which includes haws, ivy-berries, seeds of charlock, tares, vetches, speedwell, bird's eye and even small snails collected from the water-meadows.

The pigeon shooter who does not farm loses nothing by these raids, but if he wants to help the farmers while enjoying good sport himself, he should become intimately acquainted with the order in which crops are attacked by the birds, and where these crops are situated over that area of the country where he intends to shoot.

Those who study the questions I have outlined are few and far between, but the casual would-be pigeon shooter to a strange district may, by ceaseless, tireless and systematic interrogation, discover quite a lot of useful information on which to build up his programme. He may read books and articles by expert pigeon shooters. These will give him the "rotation of crops" as they are attacked by pigeon raiders. They cannot, however, introduce him to local conditions, and these he can find out only by personal endeavour. He may underrate their importance, or decide that, so long as he can discover where the pigeon are actually feeding at the moment, the sport there will be sufficient. He may even succeed in making a good bag or two, and go away contented. I acknowledge this. At the same time, he will be very wide of absorbing the real art of pigeon shooting, which, like other arts, may not be fully enjoyed and appreciated until the student and follower

becomes thoroughly conversant with every chapter of his subject.

February 21st.

At 8.30 on a February morning I was pushing my bike up a steep hill far from home. I knew every inch of that part of the county, and for a moment stopped to admire the effect of a colouring sky and its reflection on a waking countryside. To my right, twin hills rose sharply above the lane up which I was making my way, and I knew that in the deep valley on their far side lay a hundred-acre wood much loved by roosting pigeon. As I stood there, a flock of fourteen pigeon came flying low and swiftly between the hills, and for a moment I took them to be "homers," so straight and purposeful was their line of flight and so quick their wing-beats. Then, as they passed me within gunshot, obviously unaware of my presence in the early light, I saw they were stock doves (the "blue rocks" of the countryman). Keeping low and almost following the contours of the ground, they were quickly lost to sight. Then came another lot, and another, and another—all stock doves obviously making for some feeding ground far away. A quick spot of mental arithmetic, and I reckoned that no less than three hundred birds had passed by, all coming from the wood below the hills.

Next came the woodpigeon. First a few little flocks, heading in the same direction as their smaller cousins, then larger flocks more spread out, some birds swerving and diving as though full of the spirit of life and vigour influenced by a fine, cool morning. What shooting one could have had from behind the bush in the lane where I stood! Birds in the wood would not have been disturbed by the shots, and I imagine some very pretty sport would have been enjoyed over a period of half-an-hour or so. And still they came, until even I became surprised at the number. One large flock did not follow the rest to the distant feeding ground, but came over the brow slowly, turned, circled and settled in the beech trees that crown one of the hills. There they remained while their fellows, in medium and small flocks, passed out of view—many hundreds of hungry

woodies whose twice-filled crops would almost fill a hamper with the stolen produce of the farm.

In days gone by, I had often stood at dusk in the wood, sometimes on my own, sometimes as a member of an organised pigeon "drive," and memories of those times came back to me. On one occasion I took up a position among some elders growing round the foot of an oak at the corner of the wood. It was a party night, and a great deal of banging was going on. As the big droves of pigeon circled round, preparatory to diving into the trees and ash-poles, someone was certain to try and strain his gun, when off would go the flocks, presently to return and make another attempt at roosting. In the meantime, smaller flocks and odd birds came flying in over the crest of the hill, to settle in the tree over my head. When, after darkness had fallen, the party met by the gate at the end of the main ride, it had collected eleven pigeon. That is, until I arrived with bundles comprising twenty-seven birds.

On the next pigeon shoot, I found, when I approached the elders, that a young farmer had beaten me to them. I said nothing (perhaps being too full for words) and retired for a while to another spot. That evening I spent most of the time walking through parts of the wood, keeping birds on the move for the benefit of the party. The young farmer returned with four birds, for the direction of the wind had changed, but also the pigeon were feeding elsewhere, on the far side of the wood. A few lessons in pigeon craft would improve his "style"! .

During hard weather, when I could not get on with trapping and wiring, I spent the mornings with the ferrets and nets, one day meeting a friend, one Tom, by appointment in the early afternoon. Putting him in a good spot under some trees surrounded by ash-poles, I left him to await the coming of pigeon, many of which would, I knew, arrive at any time. Poor Tom! On a visit I paid him, I found him to be frozen stiff, his feet absolutely numb, and his fingers rammed into his trousers' pockets. I walked up to the hut and fetched some sacks, telling him to stand on them, instead of on the cold ground. As I was chatting to

him a woodie arrived overhead and up went my gun. As I pressed the trigger I thought there had been an earthquake. In actual fact I had been smoking a pipe, and, as the shot was fired, the contents of the bowl landed in my open eye. I believe my antics for the next few minutes warmed up even the disgruntled Tom !

On another occasion, I had seen a particularly wild flock of stock doves feeding at a spot where there was very little cover for a gun to conceal himself. The field was just outside the wood, and a mixed flock of loft pigeon had evidently attracted the little wild birds. Accordingly, I brought two dead fan-tail pigeon with me next day, using these as decoys, and very successfully the scheme worked. A mechanical decoy, with a flip of its wings will often attract passing pigeon that have not seen those decoys set out for their "benefit." In the absence of a mechanical pigeon I suggest the use of either one or two white birds set up near ordinary decoys, especially on a dull day. Some wildfowlers will appreciate this point who have used a "pilot"—a white decoy gull placed among decoy duck. It is a very effective means of attracting passing birds.

CHAPTER III.

MORNING EXERCISE.

IT is good these evenings, as the twilight lingers, to exchange for a short time the gun for the spade, the rod for the fork. One may feel at peace with the world when on the hills or in the woods, but I doubt if any scene breathes more of contentment than that of men, home from work, digging and sowing their gardens and allotments as the spring evenings lengthen. Maybe there is a feeling in the air of frost to come before morning, but coats are off and sleeves rolled up. Not a breath of wind; columns of smoke curl up from the chimneys of the cottages where wives are preparing a meal. Comes the scrape of wood on steel as a spade is relieved of adhering soil—a sound in miniature of that which we make when scraping clogged plough-shares.

The second day of spring! Yet this morning when I rose there was a white frost that made my broad beans look dejected. Mould and wire guards protected two rows of early peas, but three of these guards had been shifted by cats during the night, and one or more of these howling felines had rolled well and truly on the newly-planted onion bed. However, out of evil may come good, for small birds play the devil with seeds and peas, but where one or two cats lie ambushed small birds will not come.

I was abroad soon after five-thirty, and daylight began to put the surrounding fields into perspective as I made my way down the lane towards the brook. At the bathing place (of summer) the dogs approached the margin of the stream gingerly, lapping the cold water with obvious enjoyment after their exercise. Through waist-high dead stalks we went and through a fence of barbed wire, on which the hound left a tuft of yellow hair. Across the big meadow we made our way. Horses and cattle had well manured the grass and it was necessary at short intervals to roar at the pups as they attempted to sample that which they had no business to sample.

At the mouth of a ditch which flows into the brook, a pair of duck rose, the female of the species quacking loudly, the

drake uttering husky sounds that reminded one of a punctured motor-horn. Two partridges swept away, topping the willows and leaving behind on the grass a scent that baffled the dogs, since they had not seen the birds depart. At first sight, the willows seemed as "naked as they were born," but a closer inspection revealed tiny buds that must soon burst and sprout into leaf. Among the branches of a straggling tree that towers above its pollarded brothers a thrush was singing gaily, its speckled breast puffed out in defiance of the cold. Below it, in a "scrotch," were the remains of an old moorhen's nest, full twenty feet above the water. Plover were calling and tumbling over the bean field on the far side of the hedge, their restless energy spent on display, or on chasing off rooks from prospective nesting sites.

For all its apparently timid nature, the common peewit is a gallant bird, the hen risking her life for her young in attempting to hoodwink and draw away intruders, while both sexes will fearlessly attack and buffet herons, crows, rooks and hawks. To watch herons and plover giving an aerial display above the water-meadows of a spring evening is to witness something really worth while. And very soon, above such spots, where the kingcups grow in the more marshy places and where golden buttercups and delicate milkmaids carpet the grass, such free shows will be common, while snipe drum overhead and redshank patrol and enchant one with their lovely belling.

This morning the water looked grey and cold. Even the dogs shunned complete immersion. A small chub or dace jumped once or twice beneath a willow, a moorhen croaked round a bend in the stream, a few pigeon clattered out of the whitethorns and a dozen gulls passed over towards a field where fish manure had been liberally spread and smelt like violets will probably smell in the world where Lucifer stokes his fires.

Already mole "nurseries" had appeared in the sheltered spots in the fences. Actually, the young are not born until May, and I fancy many of these "nurseries" or "fortresses" are bachelor "clubs," or winter retreats. It is true that one will find nests of dried grass and leaves in them, but

that does not necessarily mean that they are built to hold young. The boar mole (yes, the male and female mole are properly termed boar and sow) looks after his own comfort, and, in May, many of the so-called "nurseries" will be found not to hold young, while smaller "fortresses" also containing nests will harbour from two to seven little blind, pink youngsters. I think five is an average litter; at least, that goes for my own experience.

It is said that dogs have an uncanny sense that tells them who loves them and who does not; who can master them and who is likely to let them have their own way. I was playing darts in a strange inn last week-end and a dart I threw bounced off the board and stuck firmly in a fat bitch curled up asleep near the fire. The wounded one leapt up and went tow-rowing round the room until I caught her and relieved her of the painful weapon. Then I patted her, pulled her tail and ears and rolled her over, smacking her tummy. I made a great fuss of the poor creature and she wagged her tail and reciprocated the show of friendship. Just then, the landlord arrived through the door and stood staring. "Good heavens," he said, "that dog won't let anyone touch her! She's a savage devil and will have hold of anyone." The bitch remained on her back, wagging her tail, and I went on playing with her, though ready to withdraw my hand with speed if she snapped. Gingerly the landlord approached and patted her, when she immediately bared her teeth and growled. She did the same to anyone who later approached her, but for me, who had inadvertently caused her shock and pain, she showed the greatest affection. I think it must be true that dogs recognise men of good character!

CHAPTER IV.

TRAPPING SKILL.

ALTHOUGH it has been my unhappy lot, from time to time, to control the fox population in non-hunting country, I can truthfully say I have never written about this sad, but interesting, subject, for to encourage vulpicide, or give hints to those with an inclination that way, would go dead against the grain of one whose love of hunting is second to none.

During war-time, however, it is necessary to control foxes everywhere, not only for the benefit of agriculturists, poultry farmers, etc., but also for the good of the future of hunting. Therefore, knowing I had a long week-end's holiday, there came to me a farmer on whose land were some litters of cubs, with the request that I should "do the necessary." My reply was that I would have a walk round his place that very afternoon and report to him later—a reply behind which lay caution and cunning! That evening I cycled over to his house and delivered my ultimatum. I would, I said, "do the necessary," providing he allowed me to trap the three or four rabbit burrows in the vicinity of the foxes' earths. The rabbits, I pointed out truthfully, were damaging the spring corn, and I suspected about four old does and their young and, perhaps, a couple of bucks. Agreement having been reached, I returned home to sort over my traps and to contact a keen young countryman who, some time ago, had asked me to instruct him in the art of rabbit-catching.

Next morning we were afield bright and early. I had not set up my traps the night before, as I like to attend to that business earlier in the day, so that the disturbance caused by knocking in the pegs may be forgotten by the inmates of the burrows when they venture out to feed and the human scent has been blown away. In this case a stiff breeze from the S.W. was blowing right down the burrows, and the "soil" was of a gravelly nature, full of busy little stones that have a habit of slipping under the pans of the traps, or catching between the jaws when they spring. And let me

add here that I am saying no more about foxes, but offering a few minor rabbit-trapping hints for the benefit (I hope) of budding young trappers such as my present companion in crime.

The first burrow we came to consisted of three main holes, with a "pop" hole in the field above the bank. Telling my companion to watch me carefully, I hacked out the "shape" of a trap just below the entrance to the hole, so that the spring could lie almost at a right-angle and the jaws right across the door-step, as it were. I set the trap in order exactly to measure the "shape," then sprung it, and commenced to hammer in the peg through the ring at the end of the chain, explaining that the further a rabbit could pull the trap down the hole, the better. Then I reset the trap, carefully pressing down the gravel and sand round spring and jaws. Having no sieve with me, I reached across the ditch where a mole had been at work in softer soil, and, grabbing a handful or two of this, I placed it beside the jaws of the trap and carefully and lightly flicked it over them and over the pan with a twig until they were quite concealed, now and again knocking off a tiny stone, or stick, or root. Finally, I gathered a handful of sandy gravel, worked out the stones, and sprinkled it over the whole layout, thus concealing the different shades of soil.

Ten minutes later I heard my pupil cussing. I had told him to set a trap in an "easy" hole. "Every time I go to hammer in the peg," he said, as I asked what all the row was about, "the blankety trap goes off." "Try knocking in the peg before you set it," I said, and was rewarded by a mumble, almost of apology! But I was not surprised at his seeming foolishness. None of us can learn even the most simple lesson perfectly at once, and impatience is not one of my traits.

Next morning at daybreak provided a number of lessons. There was a burrow with two holes in which tracks and signs had convinced me there was an old rabbit—probably a doe. However, the traps remained as we had set them, and only on the third night did the "old girl" venture out. "How do you know she's been in all this time?" queried

my pupil, "she may have been caught while entering." I was paunching this rabbit at the time. "Regard her stomach," I replied; "see how the empty bag of it is shrivelled.

Another two-holed burrow provided another doe, obviously being suckled. "We were going to look at the traps again this evening," I said, "but now we are coming over at midday as well. This doe has a well-grown family, and, in the absence of their mother, they will be getting caught, one after the other"; a prophecy, if one can call it such, which proved true.

A third doe caught was dead in the trap and my companion suggested that the evidence of fleck torn from her coat pointed to the presence of vermin—possibly a fox. "We shall have a buck in the trap to-morrow morning," I said, "and very likely one the morning after that." We did.

Then there was the question of traps which had sprung with the jaws containing merely a "pinch" of fleck. A rabbit, I pointed out, which issues through the small entrance hole in gravel may, or may not, step on the pan of the trap. If it does—well and good. If it misses it with its front paws (when either coming in or going out) it may, in bending low, spring the trap and have a little fleck torn from its tummy. Accordingly, every hole needs careful individual study before a trap is set. Every experienced trapper, of course, knows this, and he fully appreciates that each hole is a problem of its own—either easily solved, so far as the setting in it of a trap is concerned, or one the solution of which requires very careful consideration.

April 17th.

Gypsies, as the subject of writers of romance and painters of pictures, have enjoyed a "place in the sun." In the eyes of most landowners (great and small), the police and gamekeepers they are less favourably viewed. In short, they are recognised as being of a definite nuisance value, cunning, deceitful and dishonest. Drawing up their caravans at dusk, they release their horses in other people's meadows

without permission; they pull fences to pieces to provide wood for their fires (and often to sell to householders as firewood); they poach freely with dogs, wires and nets; they "knock off" what they can; they brawl among themselves; they are prevaricators of the truth and cunning thieves; they even stoop to blackmail when opportunity affords.

This latter statement may surprise some readers, but several cases of blackmail by these nomads have come my way, the last when a young married keeper friend of mine turned a gypsy girl out of a wood in which she was wandering. Her father immediately made a number of quite unfounded accusations against him, demanding money as the price of silence. Happily, my young friend owned his share of common sense. He reported the incident first to his wife and then to the police, and the gypsy father—whom I knew well—received a term of well-deserved imprisonment. It may be said that such cases are not unknown among folk who are not of gypsy blood. This is regrettably true, but I mention this rather unusual and unsavoury subject connected with gypsies, partly as a warning and partly because I have not seen it in print before.

In days gone by, I had an employer who shared my views about gypsies, for he had suffered seriously from their depredations. I had orders to "move on" any families that pulled in for the night. This, of course, resulted in many "brushes," but only once or twice had I to call in the help of the police. It is my experience that most gypsies are cowards at heart, but when in greatly superior numbers and particularly having had a few drinks, they can be daringly dangerous.

"But surely," said a friend to me some time ago, "you must admire the independent spirit of the gypsy, and the picturesque sight of the caravan camp with its good-looking, dusky women. The brasswork shining of the caravans alone reflects their energy, and so much washing hanging on hedge and fence their physical cleanliness. Would you honestly say the countryside would be the same without them?" To this I replied that the gypsy certainly looks after himself and his own creature comforts, and that, most

certainly, the countryside would not be the same without him—it would show a vast improvement.

There are some scribes (all too many of them, in fact) who will write with romantic fervour of the wiles of the poacher, the cleverness and courage of the thief, the "romance" of Raffles, and even that of the highwayman who robbed and murdered for his own gain. Cut-throat pirates are painted as heroes, and young people are brought up to regard them as such. Of these rogues, the gypsy, perhaps, is a minor member, but when one has had first-hand dealings with him over a number of years, his colourful personality and engaging ways are forgotten, and one regards his presence, even within miles of a district, with suspicion, tempered with the knowledge that someone's going to lose something somewhere!

To give the "gypo" his due, he is industrious. His women folk work hard after their fashion, and he, himself, engaged to work on the land, gets down to it with a vengeance, but also with an eye to what he can "lift." His children, brought up in the atmosphere of the overcrowded caravan, start to work almost as soon as they can walk.

Those who champion the gypsy make the excuse why so many strong young males of the species neglect to join the army or help the war effort that the race is an international one and prefers to live a peaceful and not a war-like life. How could such rubbish have been devised! Either these men belong to the country in which they live, or it has become the land of their adoption. Accordingly, it may be pointed out that if one lives, or is staying in a house the owners of which are giving their hospitality and someone breaks in at night with the object of murdering them, it behoves the guest to offer himself in defence; not to complain that the quarrel is not his.

This, then, is my brief opinion of the very great majority of true gypsies (as opposed to showmen), and it cannot be said to be one in their favour. On the contrary, I make no bones about branding them as a race of unromantic undesirables without which the countryside would be cleaner and far better off.



REQUIEM

"Dogs stay with us for all too short a span . . . that's the devil of dogs—real good dogs."



ONE-TIME HAUNT

"At the sound of the shots most of the feeding bunnies bolted for the hedge, but I was able to walk up two."

CHAPTER V.

ONE-TIME HAUNT.

THESE words are being penned after a day that has been more fitting to midsummer than to spring. At four o'clock this morning it began to freeze hard, and when I returned home to breakfast I found the tops of my early potatoes well blackened. Rightly or wrongly, I took my knife, cut off the haulms below the earth and scratched over as much soil as I could.

During the past fifteen to twenty years I have been in a position to talk about rabbits by the thousand. On one estate we killed from five to seven thousand in a season, and I have topped the two-thousand on my own account. Rabbits became almost part of one's life, and certainly there was little enough difficulty in getting young or old for the larder. Nor did I ever tire of rabbit pie (hot or cold) containing small rabbits and a rasher or two of fat bacon. Since I have moved to fresh quarters, however, a dish of nightingales' tongues is hardly less rare than a rabbit. From the top window of my cottage I can see the woods and hills of my old haunts—even see the white scars on the hillsides which denote big burrows tunnelled into the rubble. But the hedgerows and banks of my new neighbourhood are entirely free from rabbit holes, and a breathless hush descends over the village if a man is seen cycling through the street with a rabbit swinging on the handlebars. Here indeed is a "foreigner," and speculation becomes rife as to where he comes from and where he is going.

For some reason I awoke two nights ago filled with a great longing for a bundle of young rabbits; accordingly, I set out after breakfast to-day, arriving eventually on ground once familiar to me. There was still a nip in the air as I climbed the stile and headed for a small wood, in which a sparrow-hawk and a crow used regularly to nest. Crossing a rush-meadow, I flushed a snipe and bolted two or three rabbits from their seats in the tussocks. The snipe climbed swiftly towards the clear sky and started to drum; the rabbits, old ones, tore off to the bank in the wood. They

were not my concern, though I will admit that, after all these years in rabbit-infested country, I still feel something of a thrill when a rabbit bolts from the grass. In the wood, I chose a path that would eventually bring me out at a corner facing a thick hedge, and there, as I guessed, were something like thirty rabbits of varying sizes sitting about the meadow. By taking advantage of a line of bramble bushes it is possible to approach this hedge, so that one can presently pop up almost between it and rabbits feeding well out on the grass. The old tactics held good. I came within range of five or six almost half-grown rabbits and was able to kill two with the first barrel and another as the remainder scuttled for home. Immediately I showed myself, giving a wave with a white handkerchief. At the sound of the shots most of the feeding bunnies bolted for the hedge, but one or two immediately froze tight to the ground and I was able to walk up two of respectable size.

I had also caught sight of several small rabbits disappearing down a hole in the centre of the meadow, and, knowing no big burrow existed there, I went over to the spot. It was obvious that a week or two since it had been scratched out as a stop, but now there were two holes, one of which I covered with a piece of turf heeled from the ground and trodden into the opening. Leaving my gun on the ground, I returned to the hedge for a bramble and a short stick, and pointed the latter so that I could use it as a guide and probe to find exactly how the hole ran. Eventually, and without using the bramble (for the purpose we usually use a bramble!) I was able to follow the hole for some two yards and then to lie down, insert my arm and bring to light four "frying" rabbits. (*Note: Small rabbits fry excellently, and so do little marrows of about the same size!*)

As I returned through the wood I made a journey to the tree where the sparrow-hawk nested, and there was every evidence of the old-time nest. I bet my bottom dollar that very shortly new sticks will be added, and I hope the present owner will be as energetic about this site as I used to be. Year after year I killed two or more sparrow-hawks here, and still the nest was used. The crows, I noticed, were not using this wood now. I guessed that while still afar off, for

had they been nesting there the old cock bird would have been seen and heard from some convenient tree-top, and his mate would have been warned to keep a sharp look-out and to slip from the nest at the first suspicion of approaching danger.

In spite of the drought, the wood was already a shady bower, among the leaves of which chaffinches and other small birds sang and reeled. I missed the voice of the nightingale which used to sing here by night and by day, but I did hear one in a covert close by where there used to be two pairs. For perhaps half an hour I sat at the foot of a poplar in this miniature Arcadia, watching the sunlight filter through the young foliage and thinking of past days spent about the place. Idly, I visited four spots where I used to have tunnel traps. In one a trap was set; the other three had fallen into disuse, though once they had proved deadly enough. At another spot I saw the remains of my handiwork—a few dead fir twigs at the root of a tree. These were barely discernible in the matted grass, but they had once formed the run-in to a baited trap into which hedgehogs, rats, rooks, and more than one poaching Grimalkin, had walked.

Have you ever admired a good hedge, well and cleverly laid, and in later years watched it grow up, uncut, get gappy and finally be patched up with wire? I felt rather like that about these old haunts, where boughs and undergrowth were encroaching on the rides and paths, and where the pheasant feed was now a tangle of nettles and tall wild plants. A rusty trap was hanging against the trunk of a Douglas fir. I remember how, finding its jaws weak, I had left it there, intending to use it for other purposes than for small vermin or rabbits. No one had bothered to remove it. There were many other signs and portents about this small wood and about the surrounding meadows which set me thinking, and, in a way, I was not sorry to turn my back on the place.

May 12th.

After an unpleasantly noisy night, due to the activity of the Luftwaffe, I stood this morning on a bridle-path overlooking the brook. The bright sunshine, following on the

frost of an early dawn, acted like a tonic on the mind, and the unrealities of the night seemed to vanish like a bad dream.

Between the willows' fairy-like screen of delicate green buds, the meadows on the far side of the water lay calm and serene, dotted here and there by colonies of mole-hills and splashed with rich gold where patches of kingcups grew about the marshy ground. Here, where the cuckoo called and swallows swept low over the pasture, one's thoughts rested on all those things so dear to the heart of the countryman. There were half-grown rabbits nibbling the grass close to their burrow under the upturned root of a fallen elm. There were pigeon drifting lazily over the meadows starred with moon-daisies. A woodpecker, seeing the funny side of life, laughed as he flew in dipping flight to the broken-off trunk of a dead tree in which he probably intends to make his nest. Indeed, I am sure he will nest there, as he did last year, knowing or caring nothing for the fact that a few years ago this tree was blasted by a vicious stab of lightning.

The ugly and persistent voices of newly-hatched rooks could be heard issuing from an isolated nest in a fir, and those of the parent birds—a veritable vocabulary as they brought the youngsters food and administered it—mingled with a background of lark song and the churring note of a greenfinch perched on an overhead cable.

Within a hundred yards of where I stood a mallard duck was sitting on twelve pale-green eggs in a nest of down carefully concealed in the top of a pollard willow. As I passed her by I saw her snake-like head camouflaged among the brown twigs and bark. Anxiously she watched my progress, but I gave no indication that I was aware of her presence. The hatching of her eggs, however, is a race with time, for the line of willows among which her own is set are being lopped, but my own calculations lead me to believe that she will get safely away with her brood before the man with his short ladder and ducket (local name for bill'ook) arrives to belabour her top-storey flat. Her husband, nevertheless, is a bit of a fool. Instead of passing his time in the brook he swims lazily about on the pool in the ditch under their home,

and I fear greatly that he may yet give away the location of the nest.

Bands of evacuee children roam the countryside and have developed a keen "nesting sense." It cannot be denied that they destroy a great many nests, ignorant of the fact that the small birds of the countryside are invaluable, not only for their presence and song, but because they destroy insect and grubs which prey upon farm crops. I had it in mind that their teachers might help to educate them up to facts, but boys will be boys, and many of the teachers are themselves evacuees with little or no knowledge of the country.

And here into the landscape comes old Jack, the horse-dealer. Bridle over arm, he walks slowly towards a piebald pony which wanders just as slowly away. For the full length of the meadow the pair walk, then, with a slight kicking of heels and a playful snort, the pony canters off back to the gate and Jack's endearments turn to invective. I recall the day when I met Jack leading a horse down the road and queried where he was going. It appeared that he had been offered one of four ricks of hay and, doubtful of the quality of the fodder, he was taking a horse along to sample it for him. A horse never fails in this respect, he assured me, for you can trust him to tell which is the best hay.

In the brook below me a water-vole leaves the bank, swims out a little way, then, in a half-circle, heads for a stump under which it disappears. I see no more of it, though waiting patiently for several minutes.

There are no more eggs, I note, in the moorhen's nest in the fallen white-thorn on my side of the water. Three lots of five eggs have I had from that nest, enjoying them hard-boiled, all except two, which I consumed raw one frosty morning on my way home to breakfast. Personally, I prefer them to the eggs of plover—a mere matter of taste.

Well, day-dreaming, they say, never got a man anywhere, so, calling up the hound, which had been mouse-hunting among the grass, I continued my peregrinations along the

pathway, nursing a sense of pride in my own observations and knowledge of small matters.

May 18th.

In every wood or covert it has been my fortune or misfortune to look after, I kept a trap, or traps, here and there (usually hanging concealed from some tree), so that I had them handy in the event of seeing a stoat enter a burrow, a drain, or a faggot-pile. My reason for this will be obvious to every keeper. A warning, however! Let an old stoat with a well-grown litter realise that you know its whereabouts, and though you have gone but five minutes to fetch some traps, on your return the stoats will have vanished, neither are you likely to catch sight of them again in the vicinity.

Alas, we do not always follow the dictates of our own reasoning and advice! There have been times when I have been caught napping; a solitary stoat, one accompanied by young, or a weasel, has been seen to go to ground or shelter and I have cursed myself for having forgotten to leave a trap handy in that particular bit of wood. On second thoughts, however, perhaps that stoat and her family will not vanish during my long trek through the wood to the hut where the nearest traps are hanging. The dog left tied, or untied (according to how it is trained) and/or my old coat propped up close by and upwind will probably "hold the fort" until my return. And so it has—on several occasions. Nevertheless, it is a first-class tip to have odd traps hanging about a wood, though this does not mean that a full quota of tunnel or baited traps should not be kept working at all those places where stoats, etc., are likely to run.

Another tip, while I think of it. It is sometimes useful when setting up a new tunnel trap, to fix the trap itself so that it will not spring. Stoats, weasels and rats that have been using the hedgerow or bank may well be suspicious at first of a new run-through, but once they find there is no apparent danger in using it, they will no longer avoid it. That is where man's cunning comes in. One morning he decides to get the trap working and consequently removes the twig which he wedged in between pan and jaw, and so,

without disturbing the ground afresh and leaving his scent behind, everything is ready for the reception of the next head of vermin to pass that way.

The fact that stoats are good climbers will not be disputed, but just how good they are and how often they climb may well be underestimated. A season or two ago I was walking along a hedge, when the dog bolted a stoat that made off parallel to the fence, on the other side. I had no chance of a shot, but followed up, hoping to get one sooner or later. There was a narrow gap, I knew, beside a big, ivy-covered elm, but the stoat beat me to it, and I was just in time to see it flash up the elm like a squirrel. For a fleeting second I saw a snake-like head regarding me from a fork surprisingly high up, and, though I "squeaked" and watched, and watched and "squeaked," not another glance did I catch of that stoat. I was tempted to shoot up into the clustered ivy, hoping to scare it into movement, but wisely decided on another course. The way that stoat had run up the elm trunk, apparently using the main stem of ivy as a stairway, put into my mind the idea that this was not the first time it had used the tree, and that it was quite likely that it had its headquarters in a nest among the ivy, probably that of a pigeon. Consequently, instead of firing, I made a minute study of the base of the ivy-stem, and what I saw there convinced me that second thoughts are sometimes better than jumping to conclusions.

Two days later, when I passed that way again, I brought a trap in my game bag and set this carefully at the base of the ivy stem, not as far away from it as one would if intending to catch a grey squirrel, which animal usually leaps on to a tree from a distance, nor close enough for it to be missed. I "buried" this trap a few inches from its background and placed a twig on each side to form a mild kind of run-in. When I returned that way a couple of hours later, chaffinches were pinking in the hedge and the stoat was dead in the trap. It was a full-grown young dog, and, setting up the trap again, I found a second young dog stoat in it next day—possibly a litter brother. I kept that trap at the foot of the tree for some days, placing two cut bushes near it where the ground was naked, in case a covey

of partridges should chance to dust there, but it remained unsprung. Incidentally, some years before that, I had a tunnel trap working in the same hedge, and in two days caught two almost-white stoats, but nothing more over a period of weeks. The tunnel was put down because I had noticed stoat tracks in a muddy gateway at the end of the hedge.

Amateur keepers should take special note of these hints, for one or two tips stand out. A mild kind of run-in is often useful, if two twigs only are used to direct a stoat or other vermin into a trap. 'Ware setting a trap where partridges or other birds may dust, unless you take precautions. Always examine muddy gateways and similar spots for footprints, for here you have a good source of information anent the presence or passage of stoats, weasels, rats, hedgehogs, etc. In hard weather, if the mud has been churned up by cattle or horses being driven through, it is probable that a splash or two of white and the footprints of a snipe will warn you to approach that gateway carefully and at the ready when you next come that way. Knowledge of all these little matters and thousands like them are the stock-in-trade of the keeper, and those who realise this and regard them also as the stock-in-trade of the shooter, particularly the rough shooter, will find sport with the gun just so much the more interesting and profitable.

May 25th.

These mornings of late May are perhaps more pregnant with life and song than any others of the year. During nesting time, a great sense of secrecy envelops the bird world. The usually noisy magpie and jay slip silently through the wood: only the rooks, it would seem, set about their building without fear and with such a noisy wrangling and jangling that they may be said to advertise the event of their home-coming. But now, with many broods hatched in covert, hedge and garden, and with the arrival of our summer visitors, the early morning hours become a deluge of bird song and of such lively activity that there would seem to be a bird to every slug and snail creeping on dew-drenched grass and bush. The garden alone seems full of

“runners”; young blackbirds and thrushes hop about the beds and under the fruit-trees; old birds, in apparent moult, many of them with bald heads, dart hither and thither across the paths, busily feeding themselves and their young. From almost every point of the compass come the call and the burble of cuckoos and from among the arcades of greenery issue the chittering and purring voices of warblers.

Out in the open country, where the turnips have recently been hoed, are the slow-moving forms of many hares, and on the pea-field small flocks of pigeon have already gathered. In the belt of fir trees a few hundred yards from the rookery, the young rooks are shouting raucously for food and still more food. That, I opine, is the best time to kill those which have escaped the “thinning out of the rookeries.” A gun walking on either side of a belt of trees can play havoc with these birds, and good practice they make for the tyro. Or, in the early morning, before they make off into the fields with their parents, a rifle will gather a fair bag.

As the mist drifts from the river, and the warmth of the sun is felt on the surface, chub, dace and roach rise from below to greet the day, dimpling the glass-like surface of the water. In the weir pool an occasional trout, and many red-bellied barbel throw out with mighty splashes and whirring of fins. On the shallows, at the tail of the weir-steam, are shoals of chub, enjoying the growing heat of the sun, while in the rushing cascades of water that pour through the sluices of the weir itself scores of fish are “scouring,” or cleaning themselves after the spawning season.

The water-meadows are golden carpets of buttercups, with moon-daisies forming irregular white patterns, with here and there patches of milkmaids, and kingcups in the marshy places about the springs. It is good to be afield at this hour, before the world of men is properly awake. Animals and birds are less wary. Snipe and redshank, prior to settling down for the day among the reed-tussocks and lush grass, may be found on the miniature “muds” under the river bank. Sandpipers flit from bank to bank, and I

have watched a playful family of otters at this hour, drifting with the stream, or turning cart-wheels and wrestling in the water.

I came, the other morning, on an old cock pheasant sitting on the top rail of a fence. He had not long come down from roost and was still half asleep. Very quietly I approached him through the trees of the spinney. Inch by inch I moved, taking advantage of the cover of the trees, until I was almost upon him. When I bid him "Good morning!" he almost fell from his perch. Taken unawares, he was, for a moment, uncertain whether to fly, or drop to the ground, and run. He chose the latter course, but instead of facing the long grass of the paddock he turned back and legged it so close to me that I could have hit him with a long stick.

Your amateur keeper, abroad at this time, will learn much if he possesses the right instincts. He will note, morning after morning, the partridge pairs, and his search for nests will be made so much the easier. Where the cock is alone, the hen will probably be laying and her passage through the dew can be noted, though my advice is to make a detour of the spot, for the less disturbed a laying partridge is, the better. I always think that this bird is more of an individualist than any other. For instance, when practising the so-called Euston system, and returning chipped eggs under brooding partridges, I was specially able to note the reactions of different birds—how some would sit tight and allow me gently to place the eggs under them: how some would back off the nest, hissing a gentle warning (or was it intended to be a frightful one?); how just the odd bird would take sudden alarm and fly up off her nest. In many other ways I have noted and enjoyed this individuality among a species.

There is red murder abroad, too, in this early hour. The stoat and weasel are having their last "runs" of the night watches. Later, when clover and grass are cut, families of these little killers will be seen romping beside the hedgerows in the open spaces, and very fascinating is this play to watch. I have come across rooks cruelly slaying nests of fledgling blackbirds and thrushes in covert at this hour. The cries of the tortured, the agonising protests of the old birds,

have led me to the spot, and gladly I have dispatched the corvine bird so rudely intruding upon the brightness of the morning.

CHAPTER VI.

INNS AND ROAD-HOUSES.

AFTER a hard morning afield, does any meal go down so well as a crust of bread and cheese, pickles and beer, consumed in the atmosphere of a country inn? No aldermanic banquet can touch it! Alas and alack! while the present cheese ration is more fit for mice than for men, as a temporary measure, I do most earnestly deplore the fact that, in many districts, one has to search, often without success, for the kind of ale-house we associate with shooting lunches and snacks. Brewers, it would seem, now cater for the tastes of those who prefer the road-house, or semi road-house, to the thatched inn with its high-backed seats and benches, its open grate, its well-scrubbed deal tables and homely atmosphere.

Many of the old houses of the latter type where I have enjoyed yarning over a pint anent game, gardening and agriculture have now been rebuilt. In place of the sparrow-torn thatch, from under which the swifts came tumbling and screaming of a summer evening, are now neat red tiles. Where well-worn bench and forms surrounded the small, comfortable taproom, are glass-topped tables and chairs, while tall polished stools line a counter where once was a dividing wall. The smart appearance of the front of these houses, with the gravel sweep as a pull-in for cars, may appeal to the eye of the town visitor, but to my mind I recall with more pleasure the stretch of untidy grass before the inn, and the pull-in at the back of the house where the carter could leave his horse and load what time he quenched a thirst developed in the harvest field, or in close proximity to the threshing machine with its enveloping cloud of dust.

Happily, I still know of one or two old inns where sport takes me, that retain much of their old-time tradition. The floors may be cracked or tipsy; the furniture scarred with

generations of minor wounds; the thatch letting water into the attics. Nevertheless, one could eat a meal off the floors; the curtains bunched at each end of a row of flower-pots are no strangers to soap and water, while mine hostess remains a veritable mother to regular customers and strangers alike. And though, after the blinds have been pulled down and the curtains drawn and the taproom swims in a blue haze of smoke that has long turned the ceiling the colour of mahogany, nowhere better could you find the roots of agricultural England and a keenness and appreciation of sport. Could one capture the spirit of rural peace in a modern road-house, with all its apparent polish and efficiency? Would that crust of bread and cheese, those home-made pickles, go down in the same way? The question requires no answer—at least to those of us who love the old places, their comfort and warmth, and the “genuine” conversation to be heard among Sons of the Soil.

June 8th.

The great increase of sparrows there is in some neighbourhoods is not surprising, since village vermin clubs appear to have died a natural death, and sparrowing round the farms and hedgerows at night no longer appeals to boys and youths, who delight more in motor cycles and cinemas. Nevertheless, I think something should be done about the great flocks that can be seen feeding on the ripened ears of corn, taking sanctuary in the hedgerows immediately danger, in the form of a hawk or a human being, hoves in view. A revival of village vermin clubs would seem to be the answer, for then the lads of the village, too young to go far afield at night, might take once more to the clap-net and other devices.

One man who accounts for sparrows, chaffinches and greenfinches is the keeper. Flocks of small birds arrive on the pheasant rearing field, and haunt the coverts to which the coops are eventually taken. Even far out on the downlands, where we reared a few hundred pheasants among the fir coverts, we accounted annually for countless sparrows that attempted to share the pheasants' food. Not only were these birds caught wholesale—particularly in hard weather

—in cage traps of our own making, but we made pies with them, besides using them for ferret “ grub.” Whistling and feeding the broods in covert was the signal for the firs to become alive with small, unwanted guests, and, though we emptied the cages several times a day, still they came.

On one farm we built a permanent sparrow-trap, a large double-walled structure that would have been useful for taking jackdaws. The double wall prevented the interference of cats, for we always allowed at least half-a-dozen birds to remain in the trap as decoys. The lead-in was a funnel in the roof, criss-crossed with twigs, and if I mentioned the number of sparrows taken in this trap I would probably not be believed. If every farm possessed one of these structures thousands of pounds worth of grain would be saved annually. And there would still be enough birds left to carry on the useful work they perform in other spheres.

Personally, I wonder why more people do not eat sparrow-pie. In the first place, I suppose they find it too much trouble to catch the ingredients; in the second, they imagine such small birds are too much bother to prepare. In fact, it is the matter of a moment to nick the skin of a sparrow’s breast with a thumb-nail, to twist off wings, legs and head and skin the rest. To peel a shrimp is more trouble.

In my young days, the edible small birds were sparrows and blackbirds, thrushes and young starlings during the cherry-picking season, and, of course, larks, redwings and fieldfares (felts). Later in life I followed a keeper’s example and added greenfinches, caught in covert, to the list, and found them very good, but chaffinches were not considered eatable. Of all these, fieldfares are probably the best. We netted and shot them at night, or waited for them to come to roost in the evening and gave the little ‘410s a bit of exercise. Some used to be packed up and sent off to the “ boss,” who valued them almost as much as game. Nor have I ever felt compunction at killing birds that migrate in flocks from overseas, for what is a drop out of the ocean? Young starlings, of course, are not nearly so good, while old starlings are bitter, even when the backbone is removed, and I would not say thank you for them, though a few men of my acquaintance are glad of a bundle. Blackbirds and

thrushes I never like to kill, except when defending fruit crops. In this I contradict my former statement about migratory birds, as countless thrushes arrive here in September and October. I have stood in many woods at dusk when every tree and bush seemed to harbour them. From late afternoon till dark they arrived from every direction, in some cases reminding one of starling roosts, so numerous and noisy were they.

June 11th.

These broiling June and early July days have turned us all into a race of southerners—if sun-tan is anything to go by! Not only are farm labourers almost black, but helpers in the hayfields, including many evacuees, have also assumed a healthy tan, while the Army and Air Force, stationed at home, resemble warriors returned from an eastern campaign. Yet, while the days have been scorching hot, those abroad at night have been glad to don heavy coats, and from soon after midnight, to dawn, dew has soaked the grass, the crops and the gardens.

I have, alas, seen all too many partridge nests cut out. In one small brookside meadow the cutter revealed two partridge nests, those of a mallard and a snipe, and a brood of little moorhen. A friend, L., was driving a tractor, and he waved to me from a distance. When I reached him he switched off the panting engine and descended to earth. "I've chopped an old partridge to pieces," he said, "and the rooks have taken her eggs. In a second nest the eggs were crushed under the wheel of the tractor, but the old bird got safely away. In the nettles by the ditch there are the shells of a pheasant that hatched earlier, but I haven't seen her or her brood. I've cut over about six dabchicks and found a nest of plover eggs."

I sighed deeply, for my newly-taught "naturalist" friend set my teeth on edge by his simple assumption that he had run over a number of dabchicks. "Little black mites, they were," he explained, "some with red on their beaks."

Having explained to him the habits of dabchicks and identified the "little black mites" as young moorhen, I asked him to show me the plover's nest. Unhappily, the rooks had destroyed the eggs, but the few pieces of shell

among the grass confirmed my opinion that he had cut out a snipe's nest. Indeed, even as we chatted, a snipe rose from the edge of the ditch, and, taking L. to the spot, I showed him its tracks in the mud.

Very sad it is to question various carters as to the number of nests they have cut out this season and to know that, in happier times, with a keeper about the place, quite a number of these might have been saved, or at least their eggs picked up and chipped off under hens. Now, it would be better for the carter to pick up such clutches and break them where rooks cannot find the remains, but the average man somehow feels it is a sacrilege to do this, and reverently he either leaves them exposed where they are, when the rooks come down and take them, or he covers them lightly with cut grass, hoping in the back of his mind that the old bird will return to them. It takes more than a light covering of grass, however, to conceal nests from the black army of rooks that walk backwards and forwards over the hayfield right up to dusk, and thus the sable bird learns to search for nests and to enjoy the contents.

Many of the rooks in the hayfield are this year's birds, and their plaintive caws and wing-flapping show that they still hope their parents will help them to satisfy their hunger with the minimum of exertion to themselves. Many old rooks answer this appeal, and, being followed about by their noisy offspring, occasionally hand over some tit-bit discovered among the hay. I like to pick off these young rooks with a rifle, and one can even hit them as they clumsily leave the ground in the wake of an old bird. They are anything but lean, despite the drought, and are welcome in the village and often bartered for something more refreshing! And, be it confessed, if a couple of young crows are shot and given away as rooks, the health of the receiver being drunk in barter, "no one knows any different," as the saying goes! Incidentally, the hay crops are unexpectedly heavy. The rainfall we had before the present drought brought the grass on a treat, and, whereas we all at one time expected thin, poorish crops, most meadows show a thick bottom, and, under present circumstances, one could almost cut and pick up the hay on the same day!

CHAPTER VII.

SUMMER IDYL

(*by some pronounced "idle"*).

MY humble scribblings have brought me many curious letters. Budding poets have begged leave to borrow phrases or sentences I have used. Anti-sport cranks have committed me to eternal damnation, prophesying that, at the end of a life spent in causing untold sufferings to beasts and birds, the flames of red hell will consume me, and there will be no escape. Sometimes there arrive "leg-pulls," but I do not recall having been caught out yet, though that delight may be in the offing!

But recently I received a post-card from one signing himself, or maybe herself, "Admirer." What exactly to make of this I did not know, for the two lines thereon read:

"Summer Idyl: write of this—

Nights of Stillness, Days of Bliss."

How was I to treat this charming message? Was I to regard it as an out-of-season Valentine, a genuine request, or just another "leg-pull"? The lines might convey that "some are idle"; at least, my suspicious mind immediately settled on that possibility, yet, searching my conscience, I deny that I am ever idle. Maybe, from time to time, I have rested from my toils, stretching myself out on the green grass to watch the swallows and swifts gyrating overhead against a cloudless sky. To idle, this may be, yet, with eyes very much on the alert and ears attuned to all the sounds around me, interpreting, appreciating—well, that, I opine, is a different form of laziness to the kind that is to be condemned.

I could not help thinking, however, that my correspondent was being serious. And, if I am any judge of caligraphy and the character that so often underlies it, I guessed that the writer was of the fair sex, of a romantic disposition and not a little self-conscious. So, lest a proposal of marriage followed in the same handwriting, I hoped my correspondent would picture me amid the scene I will unfold—a stocky, ungraceful figure in torn corduroys, smelling faintly of what

are commonly called in our circle " rabbit guts "; a figure, moreover, with which any self-respecting scare-crow would refuse to change clothes; a prowling, furtive, suspicious-looking cove from whom children run screaming and dogs back away with raised hackles. But idle—No!

The scene, then, is set in a small circular covert far from the madding crowd; a covert of strange construction which once upon a time (before there was the mother and father of a row between farmers relating to the damming and sluice-gating of the brook that ambles past it) was known as the Duck Pond. This name was given to it because the whole of its centre could be flooded at will, and we used to rear a couple of hundred duck there in the shelter of its border of firs. And what sport we enjoyed there!

Nowadays, the Duck Pond is dry, except after heavy and continuous rainfall. Its whole centre is a jungle of undergrowth growing up through patches of laid privet. Round the outside of the circle of tall firs runs a ride, bordered by a tangled mass of wild roses and other flowering shrubs, and, outside this again, a well-laid fence which prevents cattle from gaining access from the golden meadows outside. Never, I think, have I known a spot so pregnant with wild-life and bird-song—a Summer Idyl, if ever there was one.

To that stocky figure, lying on its back in a small dell surrounded by dog-roses, the continual hum of flying insects, the scents of all the earth, the murmurings, twitterings, churrings and croonings of a dozen and more species of birds, the hot sunshine and the cloudless vault of blue, indeed form a bit of fairyland. Petty worries and troubles lie far away. Wars are but a nightmare of the imagination. Nothing matters here except the occasional sting of a superferocious insect and the far-away hoarse calling of a carrion crow. All day long the turtle-dove croons its gentle song, the bullfinch plays on the pipes of Pan, the warblers and whitethroat, the willow-wren and the chaffinch sing their respective ditties, careless of the notes of the searching cuckoo and the dark shadows of hawking ring-doves. Every now and again throughout the day, as also when the moon rides into sight, silhouetting the tops of the firs against the violet summer sky, the nightingales burst into song, their

fine, long, drawn-out notes vibrating with the love of life and with such vigour that the song of the whitethroat, or Scottish nightingale, fades almost into insignificance. (For this slight exaggeration, may the ornithologists fall upon me!) The warm zephyr that idly passes over the grasses, gently stirring the maiden-hairs and tiny blue bells and red bonnets of the smaller flora, brings with it such a profusion of delicate scents that the mind is wafted into a paradise of intoxication. It is all very wonderful and quite impossible of record. But here, surely, is the idyl of Summer Idyls—the answer to that postcard which I viewed, and still view, with a combination of interest and suspicion!

CHAPTER VIII.

CONVERSATION PIECE.

AN evacuee from London, endeavouring to be interested in country subjects, once told me of a holiday he had spent in Sussex. His friend there owned a brick kiln and he was much impressed by the number of ponds that had formed where clay had been dug. "They were full of bulrushes and goldfish," he said, "and these had come there of their own account." His friend had told him something about birds being responsible for this: what did I think? "You could stand by a pond," he explained, "and look down on swarms of goldfish of all sizes—fish you would have to pay no end for if you bought them in a store." "Maybe," I said, "someone stocked those ponds, though it is common enough for birds to consume water-weeds and fish-spawn and eject them in other ponds, hitherto free from weed and empty of fish." I told him of little dew-ponds scattered about the downs in which all manner of weeds and small fish turned up, carried there by birds. He became genuinely interested in this subject, having previously believed that his friend was pulling his leg.

To keep the conversation going, I went on to explain to him how great beech woods, in which one seldom saw a fox-glove, were sometimes cut down and how, in the following

year, millions of fox-gloves coloured the site. For years and years the seeds laid dormant in the ground, and now, where a gap in the forest line showed against the horizon, the sun shone on acres of pink flowers.

I told him of an old lady, living in the next village, and of the border of bottles she made round her several flower-beds. These bottles (I always chip her about her "empties"!) were thrust, necks down, into the ground, only a third of their bodies protruding above the path. In the majority of them ferns appeared, growing up through the necks and clearly seen through the glass. I offered to show my acquaintance this interesting "phenomenon," but he said he was returning to "the smoke" next day, although I do believe he was just beginning to appreciate the country. "And just a little hint for you," he said, as we shook hands. "Talking of up-ended bottles, if you can get enough of these, which you can't to-day, you should make a cement path in your garden, knocking in rows of bottles with a wooden mallet while the cement is wet, so that the bottoms come flush with the path. When it rains, and, in fact, whenever the path is wet and the sun shines, you will have a wonderful rainbow effect. I once had a short path of this kind that was the envy of the neighbours."

August 16th.

The mole to-day is in the news. The little gentleman in the velvet waistcoat is assisting the war effort, and many countrymen have turned, in their spare moments, to mole-catching, thereby making a bit of extra money by the sale of skins. It is sometimes pointed out that the old professional mole-catcher is now "few and far between." That home-made mole traps—of the springer and noose type—are now seldom seen. More's the pity; I have made dozens of such traps and set them with success, though confessing that the modern mole-trap saves a great deal of trouble and is equally as efficient. There are, in fact, several types of mole-trap, from the one sold by ironmongers, to the home-made drain-pipe-and-tile one which is hardly worth consideration.

On the game preserves, our dislike of moles may be said to be twofold. They are inclined to burrow under partridge

nests, attracted there, no doubt, by the dampness and warmth of sitting birds encouraging the presence of earthworms, etc. I have found eggs "sunk" into and pushed along mole runs, and have recovered them, built up the nests again, and the partridge has returned to hatch them out. Anything obnoxious placed in the offending run will keep away further invasion. Secondly, unless the little tunnellers are destroyed and their runs well rolled in, the latter are used by weasels on the rearing field, when chick after chick is snatched in the grass, and losses in this respect quickly become heavy unless steps are taken to check the trouble—not always so easy as one might think.

The mating season for moles extends through March and April, and the young are born, usually, early in May—i.e., about six weeks after mating. I should say the average of blind, naked, pink nestlings is four to five, though I have found more, and less, snuggling in their cradle of grass and leaves. During the mating and breeding seasons, skins are of little use.

Some people will assure you that the food of moles consists almost entirely of earthworms, and that earthworms being very useful creatures, condemnation in this respect falls on the mole. While its staple diet may consist of earthworms, however, the mole is also a great aid to agriculture. Not only does it help to drain the land by its tunnelling, but it brings to the surface much sub-soil. Still further, it is a destroyer of wireworms, leather-jackets, slugs and snails. It is also said to eat lizards, frogs and the bodies of small birds and mammals, although, personally, I have no evidence that this is so. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt the statement.

The idea that the mole lives entirely underground is quite erroneous. Get out early in the morning and many moles will be found "swimming" through the wet grass in search of slugs and snails. My dogs have caught scores of them at daybreak, but so quickly can a mole dig itself in and so acute are its senses of vibration and smell that the heavy-treading walker might travel for miles without catching a glimpse of a mole slipping through the dew-drenched jungle of grass.

Undoubtedly the mole's sense of hearing is far greater than that of sight, but it is pure fallacy to imagine that this interesting little creature is blind, though its eyes are mere pin-pricks and overhung with fur, like those of a Yorkshire terrier, or an old English sheep dog. But see it can, and hear it does, though its ears have no "shells" to them, being mere tiny cavities in its head.

Those big mounds of earth thrown up in the protection of hedge-bottoms and often in the open are the living or breeding quarters of the boar and sow mole, and there is no difficulty in finding young in them during May. I have dug out scores of them when engaged in mole destruction. Over miles of downland on which gallops for race horses were situated we were forced to use any and every means to get rid of moles, and, apart from trapping them and digging out nests of young, we collected tinfuls of fat worms overnight, poisoning these and dropping them into mole-runs. This drastic method quickly rid the area of the small miners, and valuable horses could gallop safely over the turf without fear of breaking a fetlock, a neck, or the neck of a jockey.

Those who have trapped moles alive are well aware that they squeak in a high-pitched voice like bats; they are also capable of inflicting a nasty little bite. They are, strangely enough, quite good swimmers, but their weakness lies in their almost appalling hunger. A mole can live only a short time without food, and the amount it requires is prodigious for its size. Irish readers will be particularly interested in these few short notes, for there are no moles in Ireland. There are also no moles in my garden!

Some dogs are animated mole-traps; many more are good triers, but definitely less successful. I used sometimes to be accompanied on my rounds by an old lock-keeper's dog which was a cross between a collie and a fox-hound. This dog, Jim, was the finest mole-catcher I have ever seen at work, and I have seen some excellent terriers. He seemed to hear a mole on the move yards away, when he immediately froze and then commenced to stalk. Treading slowly and so delicately that he could hardly have bent a blade of grass, he arrived within pouncing distance. After cocking his head on one side and listening intently, he would

suddenly spring, the earth flying out from his digging front paws, while his jaws dived to the assault. He seldom missed and must have accounted for hundreds, if not thousands, of moles in his time.

I have often wondered what sort of a mole-catcher the fox is. Moles he catches all right, but I fancy most of these are snapped up when they are above ground in the grass at dewy dawn. I have many times seen the droppings of foxes in the vicinity of mole hills, but seldom evidence that attempts have been made to dig out working moles. My tame foxes showed little interest in mole-heaps, though they would play for hours with a dead mole.

Many birds kill moles, from the barn-owl to the heron, but one of the most successful in my experience is the short-eared owl. In their seats in the grass and rushes on my snipe ground I found many dead moles, and have several times watched an owl flapping heavily away carrying the body of one. One dry autumn I tried to discover how these owls caught their moles, for the ground was everywhere hard. I can only believe that the feat was accomplished at dawn when there may have been a light dew and the moles, half-starved, came out in numbers in search of food. Yet while, at that period, I never saw a mole above ground from daylight till dusk, I flushed a grass-owl from a seat where she had been consuming one from which the blood still ran warm. How she caught this stout little gentleman remains a complete mystery to me. Perhaps owls are even wiser birds than they are credited to be.

August 26th.

Last evening we descended from the downs, where we had been shooting rabbits, and made for ground known as the Commons. This bush-studded, rough meadow of big acreage is bordered by a wide ditch on one side and over this is a long, narrow wood that did not belong to us, but about which we had a certain agreement with the owner. Pigeon shot there could be retrieved by dogs, and, when the shooting season was on, our neighbours, killing their pheasants, threw a plank across the ditch (let down the draw-bridge, as it were), and stood a couple or three guns on our side. On this hot, muggy evening, the plan of

campaign was the usual one adopted. One gun stood at the top corner of the nearly-half-mile-long wood; one half-way down; one at the bottom. Of all the evening pigeon stands I have known this one was by far the best.

As we entered the Commons through the gate at the end of a long, winding, shady lane, ominous growls of thunder met our ears, and, no sooner had we divided, each making for his appointed stand, than the storm drove up with startling suddenness. To my left, the sky was inky black, except for great patches of copper-coloured storm-cloud, and hardly had I got beyond hailing distance of my nearer companion than bright streaks of lightning lit up the horizon, and the rumble of approaching thunder became continuous. I well recall how the sweat stood out on my forehead as the atmosphere became unbearably close. It was obvious that a storm of unusual fury was about to break over us, and well I knew that there was no shelter at all on our side of the wide ditch bordering the wood. The best one could do was to crouch beside the bank, protected only by a few reed-tussocks.

To cut a long story short, the storm, in a fury of vivid flashes and one continual bombardment of deafening roars and crashes, descended upon us, and I, for one, am not ashamed to say that I put several feet between myself and my weapon, for I have witnessed some of the "fun and games" that lightning can play. Then, at the height of the offensive, down swept a curtain of rain and sleet, driven forward with terrific fury by a gale that seemed to have sprung from nowhere. In less than no time the clear-cut outline of the downs vanished in the stream of this hell's cauldron and visibility became nil.

Now, almost as quickly as it had driven up, the storm departed. That is, the roar and crash of thunder and the flickering, snapping flashes of lightning passed away, until only the low murmuring of heavy and distant peals could be heard. But still the wind remained, and still the blinding sleet drove towards us, cutting into the wood and causing trees and undergrowth to lash themselves into wild fury.

Then came the pigeon—bird after bird, flock after flock. Over the Commons they came, like so many feathered

cannon-balls, flying as low to the ground as they could, then rising slightly as they came in sight of the wood. Darting up the bank, I seized my gun and started shooting—taking these incoming targets well in front like one does driven partridges. I did not hear the others shooting; for one thing, the whine and whistle of the wind had by no means died away; for another, I was far too occupied “hotting” up the barrels of my gun to be interested in other disturbances. How many pigeon entered the wood I could not even conjecture, but there were thousands, and those that landed among the trees and undergrowth simply hung on dazed for their very lives.

Eventually, the sheeting sleet grew less of a driving force, the wind abated, and, in less than a quarter of an hour, we lived once more in a world of calm, with the reflection of the evening sun colouring the outline of the downs, just as though nothing unusual had occurred. As the last pigeon had raced for shelter I had turned round and begun knocking birds off the trees. Many seemed so dazed that the report of the gun held no fear for them. Finally, with half-a-dozen cartridges left, I walked slowly towards the top of the wood, where the sound of intermittent firing presently ceased, but all six cartridges had been used before I arrived, while still a number of pigeon sat in trees and bushes well within range.

Wet through, with not a cartridge between three of us, but with a very fine bag of sodden pigeon, we were forced to call it a day, though we might each of us have fired perhaps another twenty-five shots. What an evening! Happily, however, such storms belong to more tropical climes, and those who enjoy them are very welcome to their grand, awe-inspiring effects.

CHAPTER IX.

TANNER A RABBIT !

EARLY this morning, hounds paid a visit to the long covert and killed a brace and a half of cubs. I wept no tears for the departed, but considered that this would be a good time to do a little entering on my own with ferrets and nets, for few rabbits would be above ground. Accordingly, I slipped a couple of old ferrets into the box, pocketed a dozen nets and set out for the scene of earlier operations.

In the covert the holes are shallow, and what digging may have to be done is usually a simple task, except, of course, where roots are thickest. Even so, it is not difficult to break a way into the shallow tunnels and the sound of kicking rabbits or feeding ferrets is not hard to locate. It had been cold when hounds arrived; there was still a bite in the air as the last of the limited followers departed in the wake of the pack. Now, however, after forcing a way among the thorns in a thick coat that afforded some protection from the long black spikes, I felt like a fat man in the steaming room of a Turkish bath. In the ordinary way, conditions were not too bad. There was no wind and one could have sat down and listened to an odd nut falling to the ground, or even a dry leaf settling on the floor of the covert. But these are no ordinary times, and to the ferreter cocking a keen ear for the rumbling of moving rabbits this fact was made only too clear as the continual roar and drone of 'planes from a neighbouring "hive" never ceased and even the harsh voice of a solitary jay in an oak tree close by could be heard only during the comparatively quiet intervals between the departure of one lot of 'planes and the advent of another. It reminded me forcibly of an afternoon spent three weeks before when I was ferreting a few small holes in a fence beside a main road. Here, at intervals of seconds, heavy and light traffic whizzed past, almost taking the seat from my breeches. Having bolted no more than two out of

an estimate of twenty rabbits from the fence, I was forced to pack up, or become a candidate for the local asylum.

To-day, I persevered with my task for a couple of hours and was about to give up, when the monotonous roar from the skies diminished almost to silence. Now, even the covert seemed to become less unbearably stifling and the sound of pigeon settling in trees some distance away could be plainly heard.

The burrows might be shallow and easy to ferret now, but there were still handicaps. The ground was so hard that it was almost impossible to press in the pegs of the nets, while the litter of dried twigs and thorns in and around the holes had to be swept clear with the hands before the nets could be laid. True, the rabbits bolted well and the ferrets, despite the fact that they were well-fed and not as yet hardened to work, showed a pleasing enthusiasm; yet when a rabbit did bolt with vigour and went tumbling away to the full length of the cord, the net quickly resembled a hedgehog, and thorns and twigs hindered its quick and clean removal and its immediate re-setting. Meanwhile, a heel plugged the open hole. Once, however, there were three rabbits struggling in three nets. Fortunately, they were the only three in the burrow, and the two ferrets came out at once and were picked up and bagged while the work of dealing with the rabbits was completed.

Here and there about the covert was a pigeon's nest with a pair of squabs sitting upright on the platform of sticks. These were poked off with a dead ash-pole, of which there were plenty. Some of the more forward birds fluttered away to be marked and poked or shaken down from among the foliage, while those that reached ground at a distance were quickly retrieved by the hound. They made a welcome addition to the bag and a majority of them had their crops crammed with "milk." Why, I wonder, do we not coin and use the phrase "As fat as a squab"?

A car pulled up in the meadow outside the covert, and I was glad to find a farmer friend at the wheel. Rabbits and pigeon were cast on the back seat and covered with a light rug to counter attention by flies. "I'll run these back to the farm for you," said the good Samaritan, "and return

with a couple of bottles of beer." " Good," I replied, " but make the order four." The car started off across the rough meadow, bumping its way through a wilderness of thistles. It did not return, but happily I lived on anticipation, which is half the battle won !

Ferretting, we are told, is a sport, and often it can be so. It can also be a business and harder than hard graft. In the close atmosphere of a dense thorn covert, with the ground like iron and burrows to be got at only after a head-down, bull-like struggle and then the clearing of passage ways with the aid of a heavy spade, it is a game, a sport if you like, that not everyone would enjoy. The relaxation, when home is finally reached, the ferrets hatched and fed, the rabbits paunched and hung up, is certainly well-deserved, as is also the half-hour spent in digging out thorns from various parts of the anatomy. Still, I think those of us who have to do these things for a living, or because they must be done, really enjoy every minute of it, though we complain bitterly at the time, especially when " sport " is slow and digging the order of the day—digging in hard ground among the bushes and roots, with a shirt soaked in honest sweat and blood issuing from cuts and pricks that we do not notice until lafer.

And so eventually, perhaps, to the inn, for a chat with men who have laboured all day on the land as a matter of routine. " No rabbit is worth more than a tanner," quoths one, " unless it's a poached one." No rabbit worth more than a tanner? Or did he say tenner? Gaffer, have you ever dug through frozen clay and roots for the better part of a morning, finally to come on a dead-end with one ferret-bitten rabbit lying " muddled up " as a reward? Offer me a tanner for it then and hearken well to my bitter words. Then, be off with you while I fill in the diggings and cool off a bit ! Or, better still, strip that coat and fill in while I have a breather. The rabbit shall be yours and you can keep your darned tanner for the kid's money-box !

September 9th.

Some twenty years ago I was engaged rabbit catching on an estate on which I have hardly planted foot since. I had

occasion to-day, however, to cycle through a portion of it and sadly I noted how the old happy hunting grounds no longer held evidence of much rabbit traffic. I say "sadly" in the sense that there flooded to mind three seasons about the place, when one's daytime thoughts and nightly dreams were almost entirely of rabbits, traps, snares and ferrets. Upon the catch depended the commission (rs. a couple), and upon the commission the bread and wine that keeps body and soul together!

Dismounting at the foot of a lane winding between two steep banks, I took stock of my surroundings. On the left, except for the absence of a tangled thorn hedge which used to cause me a good deal of trouble, especially when netting, there was little change. On the right, where in my day there had been many acres of rough "moss-grass" and clumps of thistles, the plough and drill had been busy, so that, in reality, it was just as well that the rabbits had been cleared up. Walking slowly up the lane, I glanced at every burrow, large and small, well remembering how many holes there had been to each, and noting the changes that had overcome them during two decades. Actually, there had been little change. Here and there was a small "place" that was new to me, but most of the holes with which I had been so familiar were still to be seen, some partly stopped by fallen earth; some widened by ferreters who had come, dug and departed since my day; some even showing signs of "life," though close examination proved that there had been more rats than rabbits down them. Strange to be viewing these haunts again after all those years, yet so clear was my memory of the details of individual burrows, that it seemed but yesterday that I had trapped and ferreted them!

One large burrow interested me particularly. For a hundred yards and more its numerous holes and ramifications scarred one steep bank of the lane. I remembered dealing with this difficult place. The earth, I recalled, was of such a soft, crumbling nature that, walking over the burrow, one often sank in knee-deep, for the bank was an absolute honeycomb. As the lane was considerably used by the public, the trapping of the bank caused me a good deal of uneasiness. It was over a mile from my hut in the

wood, and, while it was necessary to retrieve the catch and set up the trâps again before anyone was about, to keep an eye on the spot during the day, and to remove a certain number of rabbits after dusk, I was forced to sleep on the floor of the hut for a week or so.

Having thoroughly trapped the bank twice in the season, and noting that rabbits were returning to it during a hard spell, I decided, since trapping and wiring were now out of the question on account of the hardness of the ground, to use the ferrets. First of all, however, I took a pick and spade and spent the better part of a day cutting two trenches through the burrow. Wiser to risk making a number of dead-ends and having a few lay-ups than knowing that the rabbits were moving about under the ground and easily avoiding the ferrets. In fact, a few days after my trenches had been dug, holes began to appear in their sides, and it was obvious that the rabbits were crossing them. I caught several in nets in the act, but most of the twenty-odd bunnies I had one morning were shot with a .410 from the opposite bank. It was simple shooting, and, at each shot, the hound left my side, dived into the lane, up the far bank and recovered the slain. Now, I noted, there were but scars where my trenches had been. There was a sagging of the earth, and probably a richer growth of nettles in the spring.

Nevertheless (and I return to my note of sadness) to those who, like myself, have spent much of their lives down rabbit holes, the sight of empty burrows; of weeds growing where once there were plainly defined runs; of stamping grounds with only a few old, dried droppings, is not pleasant. It pains one to see such things; it is as if something once vigorous had fallen into decay.

September 18th.

Fire is spreading among the woodland trees and along the tall hedgerows. Already the avenue of horse-chestnuts is aflame and many of the beeches show patches of yellow and brown among their dark foliage. Even the willows by the stream are beginning to take on an atmosphere of drabness, emphasised as the sun plays upon them and upon the

background of decaying rushes and slow-moving water. A breeze so slight that it fails to ruffle the mirror-like surface of the river passes among the drooping pennants and a few of them come drifting down, to settle, as light as thistledown, and be carried away to gather presently against some fallen bough jutting from the bank.

Already, too, it seems, flocks of "foreign" thrushes have arrived on these shores. How else can I account for the hundreds that invaded a covert to which I repaired this evening in the hope of shooting a few pigeon? It was late afternoon when they began to arrive—many singly, some in parties, yet others in small flocks that came in high as dusk descended, then dropped down suddenly to scatter like fallen leaves about the shelter of the thorns. Blackbirds, like the thrushes, came arrowing in from the neighbouring and distant fields and meadows, from every point of the compass, many, no doubt, resident birds that had earned a living all day scratching about the ditches and hedgebottoms and feeding, even so early, on the grand store of berries which Nature has provided. The shrill gossiping of these birds as dusk deepened was in clear contrast to the noisy jostling of invading starlings, but I missed the harsher talk of fieldfares, which latter will not be long in joining the motley throng.

"Pigeon, or magpie—or both?" I asked myself as a chacking long-tail and a plump woodie arrived almost simultaneously in the small clump of elms over my head. Manœuvring to obtain a position for a possible double shot, I backed into a three-inch thorn that broke off short in my shoulder where that foreign body was forced to stay until I returned home, but, despite the slight shock, I did not flinch from my object. The magpie was restless, apparently in a hurry to join two more that had dived into covert. The pigeon sat plump-breasted almost directly overhead. At my first barrel the vermin bird came tumbling down, but the swing of the gun was impeded by the twigs and I shot two feet behind the departing pigeon. The gentle roar of a myriad small wings followed the double report, and such a shrill twittering and complaint of harsher voices arose that

I was immediately reminded of some of those great starling roosts among which I have at times crept to cause massed havoc and consternation. It was not long, however, before a few of the more daring spirits had ventured to return to the thicket and these were quickly followed by the rest, the whole mixed company, a note of gradually diminishing alarm in their twittering of protest, presently settling down for the night.

Truly these autumn evenings can be enchanting as the soft twilight is reflected in turning leaf, in newly-ploughed ground, in misty blue hills and the general environment of rural contentment. Out in the fields the coveys are calling to one another as they finish feeding and prepare to juk for the night. Late-feeding pigeon are flying in from the open country to the woods and copses, to the parks and willow-beds where' they roost. Down by the river a few duck are already restlessly fighting hither and thither, having arrived from the lakes and ponds, the brooks and ditches, on which they rest by day, to feed on the faster-flowing waterway. In the river meadows long lines of white mist are rising from the earth and there is a nip in the air predicting a frost before morning. From afar an old cock pheasant calls as it flies up to roost—a common enough sound in the country, but one that never fails to conjure a platitude from all who hear that hoarse hiccup. By now most of the men have returned from the fields and the smoke from cottage chimneys curls lazily up in the calm atmosphere. In the west, the sinking sun stains the sky with colours that hold one enthralled, as does the clear-cut etching of the hills with their little clusters of trees standing out against the background of fading light.

CHAPTER X.

LARDER REPLENISHED.

IT is a serious happening these days when a fool butcher-boy leaves your meat ration on the ground outside the back door and your favourite cat comes along and eats it. Of course, you feel like flaying the boy and slaying the cat, but such behaviour is out of the question. My only answer to the problem was to stuff fifty cartridges into various pockets, shoulder the game-bag and whistle up the hound. By various ways we came at last to a farmhouse and I asked to see "the gaffer." He proved very affable; indeed, it seemed that he was only too glad to accede to my suggestion that I should make an offensive against the pigeon feeding on his farm. I assured him, of course, that pigeon would be the sole target of the expedition, and offered to take the dog home, although explaining that he was fully trained and would be kept at heel and used only to retrieve birds fallen some distance away, or in awkward spots, such as the far side of thick hedges, or in water. He gave the hound the "once over," saw for himself that what I said was true, and gave me his blessing. It appeared from my conversation with him that a big flock of pigeon was feeding on some clover below the brow of a hill, and that there was a cluster of elms there and also a ditch that would form a useful hide. "Or," he remarked, "you could get behind the swede clamp at the corner by the gate." "Mind if I pick up a brace of swedes?" I asked, half-jokingly. "Help yourself to as many as you like," he replied, "I am very fond of them myself."

And so, at last, we arrived at a lane, half-way down which I noticed pigeon flying up and down on the stubble. Using the bank as cover, I stalked the flock and got in a long shot as it rose. A handful of feathers left one bird and this gradually lost height as it attempted to follow the flock, and eventually landed half-a-mile on the far side of a brook on land which I could not enter.

Under the batch of elms I now sought a place to form a hide, and discovered that there was a rough hide already

there. * Someone had forced a way through the hedge and, having broken off a number of branches round the tree, *had evidently waited there for pigeon. There were three empty cartridge cases on the ground and two more in the ditch, but no sign whatever of feathers. Moreover, the person concerned had broken the branches very roughly, leaving them peeled white in many places. Such marks might not frighten pigeon flying into the trees, but they would certainly attract their eyes, when they might well discern a man and a dog in ambush. Accordingly, I cut away the offending branches and twigs, made the hide a little more like a hide and settled down to wait events.

A cold wind and light drizzle from the north proved unpleasant, and I did not see a single pigeon for nearly an hour; in fact, I was about to leave the place, when a large flock came suddenly over the brow of the field facing me and headed straight for my trees. Up they came, giving the bare branches an almost summer-like covering, and I chose a bird, sitting breast towards me, that had two or three more near it. As I drew a bead on it and pressed the trigger, it seemed to remain sitting on the branches, even as the rest fled in every direction, and my second barrel brought down one that made away behind me, showing clearly for a few seconds through a gap in the bushes. Sending the hound for this second bird, I stepped out, in due course, to discover what damage my first barrel had actually done, as I had not seen the target fall. Searching the ground all round, I could find no trace of a dead pigeon, but eventually discovered two lodged in the top of a stump covered in ivy.

For nearly another hour we waited patiently, having set up the three pigeon as decoys. Then, a small flock made a sudden appearance, and catching sight of the decoys, came sailing down, but pitched about seventy yards away from the hide. Surely, I thought, they would work their way towards the decoys and up against the wind, but, unhappily, they started feeding away from me and facing the north-east. One bird, however, seemed to be little more than fifty yards out, and I considered it might be good policy to take a pot shot at this one, and hope that the rest, taken by surprise,

would come towards me. The pigeon must have heard the click of the gun (or did they?). They sprang into the air and came right at the hide, and I let them have a click from the other barrel before realising that I had forgotten to re-load after setting up the decoys. Here, indeed, was a lesson for an old stager, and I regret to say that I spoke my mind aloud to the hound as he sat staring at me, in his eye a mixture of surprise and reproach.

It was getting near dusk when we left the hide, and not another pigeon had we seen in three-quarters of an hour. After a walk of two miles we arrived home with three pigeon and two brace of swedes—certainly a meal of sorts, but less pleasant than that which would have been forthcoming had it not been for the crass foolishness of a small butcher-boy and the falling into temptation of an excellent ratter.

The bag, however, was not quite complete. Going round to the ferret hutches, to cover them over for the night, I saw the head of a rat poking inquisitively from a hole under the shed. Tip-toeing back to the house, I fetched the little '410 and did a quiet stalk. The head was still there and I slowly, very slowly, raised the barrels of the gun. For three minutes I stood thus, a graven image, part of the privet hedge that was my background, then pressed the trigger as the rat fully emerged. Shot, sir! A fine sleek buck rat, with no signs of skin trouble—grub for the ferrets, and good riddance to boot!

October 14th.

Many of the scenes which we old countrymen stop in our stride to admire are quite beyond the pen or the brush to describe. Maybe we come suddenly on a glade in the covert, carpeted with bluebells and lit by a bright beam of sunlight that has penetrated the spring foliage of surrounding trees. Maybe, on climbing the stile to the wood, we are confronted with the picture of a long, broad ride, seemingly an arcade, almost an inferno of all the chaotic colour schemes of autumn-tinted leaves. Maybe our thoughts carry us back to that winter's morning on the marsh, when snow and ice and an unearthly stillness made us feel part and parcel of an old-fashioned Christmas card.



CONCERNING MOLES

“Some dogs are animated mole-traps; many more are good triers, but definitely less successful.”



TALL PARTRIDGES
“are they of the proverbial ‘starling’ type?”

So many scenes of enchanting beauty come to mind, and so impossible is it to convey them from mind to paper, that one feels almost sorry for those who attempt to do so. Their pens may be the pens of ready writers, but however brilliant their composition and their ability to convey impressions, they must in the end fail, and fail dismally.

Without an attempt to reproduce in black and white what the senses have shown us, it may yet be possible to describe what is the most English scene one has in mind—a scene that for its restful beauty and atmosphere conjures up what must be the popular conception of the countryman's England. I have stood on the sweeping moors, the boulder-strewn steep hillsides where oak and birch woods drop down to a miniature cataract and where the ground is carpeted with rich folds of russet bracken. I have sat in a boat on the quiet waters and, like the psalmist of old, lifted up mine eyes unto the hills—the rugged hills with their scarred slopes and little woods hidden away in folds of the ground. There have been sunsets over lakes and downs and sea that have enthralled one and time has stood still.

We all know these scenes, typical of the country which they enchant, so that to choose a scene typical of England is, after all, a problem the solution of which is not so easily accepted. However, while reviewing that kaleidoscopic shifting of scenes, there comes to mind another scene, much smaller, perhaps insignificant by comparison, but one which never fails to promote a sense of repose in all who see it.

At the end of the street of a hamlet of some twenty cottages, the hamlet itself almost hidden from sight at the foot of the hills and by surrounding orchards, one comes upon a tiny church, its walls and beacon-tower covered with scarlet creeper. In the churchyard grow yew trees and towering over the lychgate is a splendid horse-chestnut. Perfect quiet reigns, for seldom does traffic venture to this "dead-end" overlooking the river. Indeed, as I used to drive my car to the spot, to leave it while I shot the marshy water-meadows nearby, I felt almost as though I were committing sacrilege. Yet those who have been fortunate, or unfortunate enough to share in my forays here, have

never failed to stand and admire for a minute or two this quiet corner, where, one might well imagine, Gray wrote his *Elegy*. The church is small. It is said that it was built by a reformed gambler; certainly on the four sides of the tower are openings that correspond to the spade, the diamond, the heart and the club of the card-pack. An ancient church this, that casts a protective shadow over the moss- and lichen-grown tombstones that lie within the confines of a low, ivy-covered wall. Outside this wall are elms in which there is a rookery and many pigeon fly from tree to tree, as though understanding that here is sanctuary indeed.

Toiling up the slope from the flooded meadows yesterday, carrying with us the moderate burden of four rabbits, a partridge and some snipe, we stood beside the trees of the rookery and looked back over the river and its adjoining pastures. For reasons that need not be mentioned, we had been forced to give up shooting by four o'clock, half-an-hour or so, in fact, before the pigeon would have come streaming into the old trees of what once formed a park. Even now, as we gazed back over the way we had come, a few birds were wheeling and settling and the rooks and jackdaws were returning home for the night. Here and there, flood-water gleamed among the water-meadows, and, as though in tune with the squelching of water in our shoes, a dull quacking came from overhead. Looking up, we beheld some thirty duck sweeping over and obviously making for a reach of the river where earlier we had stood listening to partridges calling on the far bank, wondering if they were coming over then, or later. There was no time, now, to go back to try for the duck, but we reckoned that the sign was a portent for another day.

Few duck have visited us so far this season, but now, let us hope, with ground softened and flood-water in evidence, they, like the snipe, will add to the attractions of a rough shoot. Yesterday, the hound pointed and then sprang into a little tussock of reeds. Nothing resulted. But ten yards away a jack snipe rose from a drain and was floored. This was the first jack that I have seen this year, and I fancy that, tired after a migratory flight, it had dropped into the

reeds, then, feeling hungry, had fluttered over to the drain—poor star-crossed morseling !

On the way home we crossed the river, and from the bridge watched about a dozen more duck circle over the water, finally to plane down on to a quiet, reed-fringed eddy upstream. And what a sight they made against the colouring sky and water, and the burning hues of leaf and rush ! From mid-afternoon to dusk the starling flocks trail across the sky from their feedings to their place of roost; ten thousand wings whisper like a light breeze stirring among the pines. Then they are past and gone, but more and ever more follow in their wake.

October 21st.

I have sometimes been asked to discuss the question of " high " downland partridges. At what height do they, for instance, come over guns standing half-day down steep hill-sides, or in valley-bottoms? Are they of the proverbial " starling " type, and do they ever come over out of range? I answer at once that I have seen coveys, flushed on the gallops, rise up to clear a larch covert and then, heading for rising ground well beyond the deep valley at the foot of the larches where the guns are stationed, sail over out of shot. A hundred and fifty feet and more above the floor of the valley, the birds do, indeed, resemble the proverbial starling, if not the more nimble sparrow ! Usually, some optimist has a crack at them and occasionally his luck holds, but some of the guns fail to note them, or believe them to be a charm of goldfinches passing over, or remark blandly that it is likely to keep fine as the gnats are dancing overhead !

Other " tall " partridges are met with on certain drives, particularly those where the stands are in narrow, almost V-shaped valleys. On the whole, however, surprising though it may be to the theorist, downland birds do not commonly afford high shots. Not only does much depend upon the contours of the ground, but coveys, arriving at the top of a steep bank, or hill-side, usually dip down it, to swing right or left, or settle just in front of the butts placed half-way or three-quarters way down. That is where your experienced flag-waggers come in. Stationed on the brow,

and well to the flanks of the line of butts, they "use their loaf" and their flags in such a way that the coveys which show an inclination to fly right or left, or settle, are flagged on. Even so, the birds usually pass over the guns little higher than they would if driven over a tall hedge in flat country. They are, however, more difficult to hit, as the sportsman sees their approach against an immediate background of bank, and his second barrel will be taken at birds rapidly departing over the valley behind him, and into an even more deceptive background of distant downs, or fields. He, in turning, may have some difficulty with his footwork on steeply sloping ground, though the good keeper, ever mindful of the comfort of the guns, will probably have dug out a flat platform behind each stand. And such platforms make easier the heeling into the ground of empty cartridge cases!

One of the best partridge stands I know is on flat ground far from the downs. Birds are driven over a railway embankment only to find on the other side a small triangular meadow in which stand two men with urgently-waving flags. The coveys, on the rise to miss the telegraph wires on the railway, go still higher at this sight, and confronting them is a long line of gaunt elms, over which they rocket. The guns on the far side are standing in a hollow in a meadow, but the pick-up here does not strain the axle of the game cart! Consistently high partridges like these are seldom seen, even on the downs.

I do not think I shall be contradicted when I say that birds, put up for the first time in the day, on, or near, the top of a bank or hill-side are far more likely to come over high than those flushed some way back. Partridges that have already been driven on the day, or those that have flown some distance before reaching a slope, are always inclined to come skimming over the brow and downhill, when they cannot be described as high birds—unless it is grass- or juniper-high! There are also those coveys which, appearing over the brow, sweep downwards to settle just in front of the guns, then (perhaps catching sight of movement in the butts) run uphill and eventually get on wing, to fly back in the face of the beaters. Very irritating birds

these, but they live to fly another day! So does the odd old "Frenchman," seen to settle in front of the butts before running to, and disappearing down, the nearest rabbit burrow!

October 29th.

For the first time this season I have been able to take a full day off and devote it solely to shooting. Not that I carried a gun myself; I had been invited to shoot, but politely refused, saying, with some truth, that I would prefer to bring along my hound and concentrate all my energy on picking-up. My prayers that the day would be fine were answered in no small measure. It turned out a glorious morning, and, since we should be shooting one big wood until lunch time, we moved, shot and gathered the dead in a world of warmth and colour, with the scent of autumn woods prevailing and the occasional harsh call of a jay giving full atmosphere to the occasion.

Some years ago, when I knew this wood with an intimacy equalled only by the woodman who had cut his quota of poles and faggots there annually for sixty years, the record number of pheasants killed in a day was just over the fifty mark, but rabbits shot would approach two hundred. On this day, no less than 109 pheasants were laid out before the farmhouse where we had tea, and three rabbits. There were also 17½ brace of partridges and nine hares that were shot after lunch on ground outside the wood. In the old days there was a good deal of oak and ash in the hundred and ten acres of the wood, but hardly any holding cover for birds; to-day, the oak and ash have been felled and carted, and undergrowth has sprung up into an almost impenetrable jungle through which beaters must bash their way. Being an isolated wood, and one surrounded by arable land with good, thick fences, there is no difficulty in attracting pheasants to it, and I dare say that twice the number shot may still be found there.

Curiously enough, there were few incidents of note during the morning, though my hound certainly brought off a nice bit of retrieving—albeit on a dead bird. At one side of the wood, where a mass of elder bushes and undergrowth slant

steeply downwards for eighty yards, flows the river, full sixty yards wide. We were standing behind the guns on the ride running parallel with this bank, when a pheasant was hit which carried on over the water and far out into the centre of a big meadow beyond, where it tumbled suddenly to earth. I had no need to tell the hound that the bird had been hit. He noticed that fact as quickly as his master. Watching its continued flight, he marked its fall and excitedly looked at me for instructions. "Go," I said, and he "go-ed." I could hear him crashing through the under-cover and through the wide fringe of rushes by the river. Came a loud splash, and presently, through a screen of birch twigs, I saw him making for the far bank of the river. I could even hear him whistling like an otter as he made all possible speed in the crossing. Soon he was scrambling up the steep bank on the far side and, without waiting to shake himself, he galloped in a direct line for the bird. When he arrived with his game he was as pleased as Punch with himself, though slightly winded after the unusual exercise. I did not wish that pheasant any harm, but I did, at the time, hope that it would prove a runner. That would have been a great test. As it was, I enjoyed and praised his work, though not regarding it as anything out of the ordinary for an intelligent dog.

How a day of this kind, after years of war, made me ache for the past! Yes, and ache for something of a transition of the past into the future! Fortunate indeed are those who are able to enjoy shooting days at the present time, even though a shortage of cartridges becomes the chief topic of conversation! There were men of the Services with us whô, I could see, were intent on forgetting for a short spell, everything but their sport and those environments of woods and fields which are the heritage of a free country.

A sailorman behind whom I waited at one stand seemed quite lost in the enchantment of his surroundings. An old sea dog at twenty-five, he had a habit of closing his eyes in a kind of rapture and taking in great draughts of woodland smells. Yet I did not need to warn him when two pheasants approached at speed, skimming the tops of the high ash-poles. They were not difficult shots, as difficult shots go,

but I applauded the quiet, unhurried way in which he raised his gun and killed them both in front of him. "Take my gun," he said, "and let me see you do likewise, for I doubt if I shall hit another bird all day." I shook my head and he smiled his understanding. Alas! he missed his next bird, though I did not see another escape through the pattern of his shot during the rest of the morning.

CHAPTER XI.

COVERT SHOOT.

CAME the day, eagerly looked forward to, when the hill covert was to be shot—the first drive after lunch. The morning had been fine and still, the downs encircled with that soft light that showed up every undulation to perfection. Guns in the syndicate and their guests had performed well, and there had been no lack of game. Three coverts had been beaten through, and the two partridge drives had accounted for forty-three brace of birds. Lunch had been eaten in Shipgate barn, a rickety wall dividing the feasting guns from the pickers-up and beaters. Altogether, everyone was in the best of spirits as the party climbed the steep hillside, the guns continuing on down to the bottom of the valley on the far side. Two guns only remained with the beaters, one to walk on the side of the covert from which pheasants—particularly cocks—had a habit of breaking, the other to stand "back-gun" in the central ride.

With the guns at their stands in the valley and beaters lined up ready to move forward; with the pickers-up in their places and the old keeper hidden away "forrard" of the covert ready to blow a whistle when pheasants flushed too rapidly, I took up my stand beside the tall soldier from the "War Box," chatting with him until such time when the beaters would have reached the central ride and we could station ourselves in their rear. I had watched Army shooting during the morning and had noted with pleasure how keen were his powers of observation, how unhurried his style and how he hit his birds well forward and marked down the

fallen. As we stood there, admiring the view that spread out to the boundary of several counties, I congratulated him on his shooting and added that I wished there were more guns like him to take birds well in front and to understand and appreciate how game is shown under difficulties.

In due course, we took up position just behind the centre ride, in a small clearing where the gun could get an excellent view of pheasants breaking back. Downing my hound, I squatted in the rear, with one knee on the ground. By doing this I was well out of the way and was also able to see for some distance under the lower branches of the larches.

For a few minutes we waited in silence, listening to the advancing beating line, to the sound of rising pheasants and the almost continual muffled bark of the guns in the valley. Then the fun began. Back came a cock and a hen, the former rapidly rising and flying directly overhead, the latter curling away over the fir-tops to the right. Next moment both had crumpled up and crashed to the ground. As the hound looked to me for instructions I gave him a silent signal, and off he went, so quietly that my gun could not have heard his departure. By the time another pheasant had broken over the beaters' heads the two dead birds were at my feet and we were waiting for more. In eleven shots Army had ten birds down, the eleventh being a miss caused through the bright rays of the sun streaming suddenly through the larches and temporarily blinding his aim.

The beaters were now nearly out of the covert, and an old cock, shouting at the top of his voice, came tearing back right overhead. Up went the gun—up and back, and the charge of shot caught the bird full in the undercarriage when it had passed well over. But the impetus of the swing caused Army to lose his balance, and down came his hand and his weight on my head, nearly breaking my neck. In my position I had no option but to roll to the ground in an untidy heap, and when I say that this gun stood six feet three in his socks and weighed over sixteen stone, my feelings can be imagined. With a quick apology, Army regained his footing, just in time to catch a pheasant curling off to the left—a difficult shot through the branches of a

border elm. Then came the old keeper's voice, "All out, sir!" and I stood up and we joked over the recent incident.

"I've got twelve birds down," said Army, "three over there, two there," etc.

"You had," I replied, "but what's wrong with this lot?", and I showed him his birds lying in a heap at my feet. He looked, gave me a queer sort of a glance, and started to make his way out of the covert. That evening, as he bade good-bye to his host, he said something about a "something combination," referring to the hound, and my humble self. This was passed to me, and I admit I felt very pleased indeed, for the hound had certainly worked well that day, particularly on two difficult runners, and an appreciation of such work by a man who knew the job as well as any keeper and who was obviously a tip-top sportsman and a first-class shot was as satisfying to me as anything could be.

The last drive that day was a short one, a few acres of coarse grass being taken through towards a sunken lane. Once more I took up my station behind Army, who, I sensed, considered that it was a bit too late in the afternoon, even for so short a drive. However, when a big covey came forward with considerable noise, he coolly relieved it of a couple of its members. Came the shout "Cock pheasant," and, in fact, a cock and a hen came into view—low birds but gradually rising. A sportsman often finds himself with two duties to perform—his duty towards his host and his duty towards his own soul. Sometimes it is difficult to make these duties coincide. There are hosts and hosts. A great number are everything they should be. A few are rather too much concerned with the size of the bag. Anyway (although the foregoing remarks do not apply to the situation of which I am writing) up went Army's gun and down came the cock. He made no attempt to shoot the hen, although the next gun gave her two barrels without touching a feather.

I mention this incident, as it is on a par with another which took place on another shoot where the host was of a slightly different sort. In this case, the gun concerned let two cock pheasants go by because they were low birds and the season was still young. That gun may not have done his

duty by his host (from the host's point of view), but he did his duty by his soul and retained his title of Sportsman. I later overheard certain remarks of the host anent the escape of those birds—remarks which caused me sadly to shake my head!

November 17th.

Rolling downs, a coloured sky and a frosty morning. Junipers shedding slowly the white, powdery "brilliant" of the night-watches. A round sun, like a red ball, hanging over Unhill, and two larks trickling down their silver chain of song over Round-Wood. A cock pheasant crows, as a he sits on the wooden rail of the laying pen. The sheep at Well-bottom baa and baa as they are hustled from their old quarters by the water-mill to the fresh hurdles near Oven's bottom. Old Joe, the shepherd, with his beer-strainer moustache, shouts to Jess, his semi-deaf collie, coming towards her ten years, and his voice causes the covey on the frost-covered clover to raise their heads. The five or six hares on D——'s Folly above Shipgate take no interest in these sounds. They are long used to them. Yet, as we trudge up the sunken chalk cart track, our heads barely visible, they stop nibbling and sit upright—then lollop away until hidden by the brow of the hill. No doubt our scent has reached them, and they like it not.

Half-way up the slope at Langdon's we relieve ourselves of our burdens. Off shoulders come the ferret boxes, and the graft, and guns are laid beside them. The slight breeze is blowing from the right direction, and the inhabitants of the burrows will have no inkling of our approach. Quietly we go about our business. No nets to-day; just two .410s. James stands uphill and down-wind to the scene of operation, while I stand well below the big twelve-holed scar on the hillside, also down-wind. Four loose ferrets have been entered, none in the same hole, and now we wait, tense and silent, for the rabbits to bolt. And when they do? Well, this is no simple matter of bowling rabbits over on open ground. The hillside is a carpet of rough grass, dotted here and there by juniper bushes. Two rabbits leave their burrows and follow the well-defined runs among the riot of

coarse grass, but they hesitate here and there (go temporarily to squat, as it were) in places where the grass grows, in miniature arcades, over the runs. In other words, they bolted quickly from the terror that lay behind them, and where we saw them darting through the grass, lo and behold there are suddenly no rabbits at all! We know there are no holes between the burrow being ferreted and the one on its right, or between it and the fir covert on its left. Comes a lengthy silence during which we keep one eye on the burrow and one on the part of the hillside where the rabbits have seemingly vanished.

In the meantime, the missing bunnies are still squatting beneath the arcades of grass, wondering whether to continue the risky journey, or to remain under cover. Both decide to lie low, but for one the decision is somewhat violently exploded. Along the same run, and bolted by the ferret, dashes another rabbit, which evidently cannons into the one at squat. There is an eruption and the road for further traffic is clear, since both rabbits, thoroughly startled, make off uphill. Now for a snap-shot with the .410s as the brown forms dodge through the grass. James is a bit quicker off the mark, and one rabbit stops dead in its tracks, but within a split second the other is caught at the back of the neck by my charge of shot and comes bouncing and kicking down the slope. Meanwhile, the third rabbit has decided to "get going," and this time I feel that James has missed the boat—until I glance round in glee, only to see him loading his gun, the smoke of action curling from his right barrel. He, too, seems surprised that I have also shot, but so many times in a season do our guns go off together that surprise is somewhat unwarranted.

Presently, as we gather up our goods and chattels, having accounted for seven rabbits (three more than we had expected), we glance out over the valley and survey the coverts dotting the downs. An immense flock of starlings is flying high and steadily towards the east, the whisper of wings faintly audible. On the meadow at the foot of the slope a few fieldfares are hopping about and "chack-chacking" as they rise to fly for a few yards. Despite the sound of shooting, a rabbit sits at the entrance to its burrow in the

centre of a meadow, obviously content with life, for its ears lie back on its head so that it resembles a prairie dog rather than an honest British coney. A school of long-tailed tits are flying restlessly about the larches at the edge of the covert, their tiny shrill voices those of fairy things by comparison with the raucous "cock-up, cock-up" of a pheasant wandering about the junipers on the opposite slope.

And so down the hillside, across the valley and up to the small field with its ragged thorn hedge where there are three or four little burrows—well worked. Here, having entered a single ferret, we stand on either side of the hedge, and do good execution of rabbits bolting and dashing off down the fence. These going-away shots tax the most experienced of ferreters, for, unless the rabbits are "tipped on the nose," or caught at the back of the skull, it is likely that the "wrong end" will suffer, a thing we do not like to see.

The winter's sun brings into sharp relief the undulations of the surrounding country and brightens the few remaining berries on the hedge. The drabness of fallow and grass, chalk lane and trees assumes a livelier tone and a wealth of colour that tunes the heart to the feeling that it is indeed good to be alive.

November 24th.

A still, foggy morning makes a special appeal to the rough shooter, for he is able to enjoy a little hedge-creeping in order to stalk flocks of pigeon sitting disconsolately about the trees. If the fog is dense, not only may both barrels bring about useful execution, but the birds will fly round, seemingly losing a proper sense of direction, and a whisper of wings announces their return overhead, with the opportunity of further shots. He will, too, surprise duck or teal on ditches and drinking pools; and even those two cunning old crows, the raucous calls of which haunt him on clear days, may suddenly loom up before him, to offer "sitting" shots.

A morning of dank mist, however, is a different proposition—such a morning as faced me to-day. Gun and game-bag slung over my shoulders, the hound running at heel, I propelled a boy's size in bikes along a sticky foot-path over



COVERT SHOOT

“with the beaters lining up ready to move forward.”



DOWNLAND FERRETING

“ . . . there are three or four burrows—well worked Here, having entered a single ferret . . . we do good execution of rabbits ”

a mile of open fields. Agricultural tractors and manœuvring army vehicles had churned the wet surface almost into a quagmire, and I had frequently to jab down my feet to prevent crashing. Having slewed and skidded my way over this short-cut (save the word!), stopping every now and again to poke the mud from brakes and mudguards, I arrived at a narrow lane twisting its way between two farm-yards. Here the mist was denser, and trees and thatch were dripping as during a heavy shower. On the top of a gate sat five Muscovy ducks; several more were lining a low brick wall, while an old drake seemed to be asleep with his beak among his tail feathers in a puddle in the centre of the lane. The birds took little notice of my passing, but the hound stopped to inspect a tuft of grass, and now, as he raced along to catch up, the strange colour-assortment of ducks nearly fell off their perches in alarm, and came flying about my ears like a covey of gigantic birds that had taken leave of their senses. Several, overtaking me, zoomed over a high elm hedge, landing on the far side, with a series of big splashes, into a mill pool, where they paddled slowly round, watched by others of their tribe that had been sleeping on a small island at the tail of the stream.

As I pedalled on, I could not help noticing the effect of this dreary weather on all bird life. Rooks and pigeon were seated about the trees, apparently without any desire to get out and feed on sticky field or saturated grass. Starlings and sparrows sat fluffed out on stacks and sheds, and big flocks of linnets and finches brooded in the sparse shelter of autumn hedgerows. On the corner of a wheat-rick a kestrel, much magnified by the atmosphere, stood rigid as I passed, but on my braking hard, opened her wings, dropped a few feet below the level of her perch and went flapping unhurriedly out of sight.

In due course we reached some gravel-pits, wondering if, after all, the somewhat depressing journey had been worth while. There might be a few duck among the decaying bulrushes; certainly there would be snipe. A shot or two would probably set nearby pigeon flying round, and some of the smaller pools should provide a coot or two. A mixed bag, though strictly limited in size, would certainly hearten

the return journey, or at least be an excuse for what must otherwise be wasted time. Such thoughts, however, were rudely shattered as we turned the corner and came into view of the "preserves." Four gypsy caravans stood there, with lines of gay washing strung out between them. There was a lurcher and a mongrel standing on the bank of the big pool round the margin of which snipe are wont to lie. Worse, the invaders were engaged in honest toil for the owner of the land, and had been there for nearly a fortnight. There was no need to un-sling the gun, or to hide the bike in a clump of firs. No need to do other than say a kind word to a disappointed dog and make a right-about-turn.

November 28th.

Rooks are curious but knowing creatures. Comes a hard frost over-night, or in the early morning before many folk are up and about! A thick mist envelops the low-lying country and everything is very still. The way leads under an avenue of trees in which a rookery is situated, and among the top-most boughs sit little parties of the corvine bird showing no energy and little fear of the humans that pass below. As we walk through the mist our clothes become almost as wet as they would in a shower of rain. The herbage, too, in spite of the sparkle of frost, holds a degree of dampness that only dubbin, or mutton fat, will keep out. The rooks, however, are wise to the true conditions of the earth. Dampness of a warmer kind will bring forth grubs, slugs and other edible attractions, yet, while the frost continues to sparkle, none of these delicacies will be forthcoming. Consequently, knowing these things, the rooks remain, almost silent, on the still boughs.

A little later, there are signs of a weak sun trying to break through the mist, but still the rooks evince no sign of material interest. Here and there, perhaps, an odd bird becomes restless and a trifle talkative, but his companions remain partly fluffed out, reviewing life with next to no interest.

At last come signs of a thaw. A few drips fall from the trees and the sun, though its warmth cannot yet be felt by human beings, appears slowly—and how slowly!—to be winning its battle with the mist. Perhaps half-an-hour

passes, when one, two and then three birds stretch themselves, as it were, and take wing—to vanish in the direction of the fields, but presently they return, to settle down disconsolately from the very boughs, if not the very twigs, they so recently left.

Comes a loud tapping, as of a green woodpecker at work on a dead bough, yet the observer, seeking this new sound, sees only a blue-tit hammering persistently on a section of bark. The sound is greatly magnified by the stillness and the mist.

Again, in due course, scouting rooks go forth, and, in their absence, the rest begin to stir, flying from branch to branch, and even pecking off a twig here and there as though thoughts of nesting already occupied their minds. A certain general show of liveliness runs throughout the colony. At last the scouts return, definitely vocal this time, as though acclaiming that the frost has been overcome and that the ground is sufficiently soft for powerful beaks to get to work. For a time, the rooks become almost musical—certainly very restless—until, by a form of mutual consent, party after party streams away to the chosen feeding ground.

This behaviour on the part of the rooks is apparently noticed by the pigeon—noticed and “timed.” They do not immediately follow, but show a certain liveliness—an awakening—which may, I think, be interpreted in these words. “The worst of the frost is over, the ground is softening, but our beaks are not such good weapons as those of our friends the rooks so we will not set out for a time; we will wait till the frost has vanished from the young clover and then we will follow in their wake.”

On the river, similar avian instincts are being demonstrated. A few moorhen have been early astir, leaving their roosts among the willows to clatter down on to the water and then to wander out on to the bank. A few go far afield—to muddy springs of their knowing, and to small hedge-row-ponds with their fringes of decaying rushes. Yet many remain at roost, showing restlessness at the exit of their kind by climbing crabwise up the branches as if to get a better view of a none-too-interesting outlook. Even the small lots

of mallard, skirting the rush-beds of the quieter eddies, appear anything but happy. With drawn-in necks, they paddle this way and that, having in mind certain peaceful spots where they can rest up for the day once the thin ice has melted. Although the river currents run and twist in happy freedom, they seem to know that the wide ditches, the ponds and the drains where they will spend the day, are, as yet, unready for their reception. But, as the sun vanquishes the mist, and wreaths of it rise to be torn to fragments, the drakes bob and bow as though feelings of spring had already taken a hold of them.

As for the white-nosed coots, the observer, early afield, will see their awkward forms skulking slowly along the surface of the water in the shelter of the bank, before they, like the earlier moorhen, clamber on to the meadow, to make their way up ditches and springs in search of breakfast.

As the weather gets harder, a complete change will overcome the life of the river meadows. Snipe, driven southwards to softer feeding, arrive at all hours of the day and night. Great flocks of green plover pass over against a grey sky, and smaller lots of their golden cousins. Vast battalions of winter-visiting pigeon set the sky whispering with a thousand wings. The harsh "tsak, tsak" call of fieldfares and the "see-ip" of redwings become common sounds. Teal spring from all manner of odd lay-bys, and little tufted duck, and sometimes flotillas of pochard, appear round the bend of the river. The lovely whistle of fighting wigeon makes merry music as the afternoon light deepens, and a bite, like the frozen hand of death, closes over the shooter's hands and the teeth of his patient hound set up a disconcerting chatter. Yet, despite the cold, such evenings are a paradise of expectation and, to me at least, compensate for the lack of game shooting days. Even the hound, having sampled, once or more, the temperature and swiftness of the river, thinks little of the jingling icicles in his coat. His ears and eyes are strained into the fading light for that last chance of a duck, and another dip means only the fulfilment of a purpose.

CHAPTER XII.

DOWNLAND WHIRLWIND.

ONE right and left at partridge and pigeon I must ever remember, for there is a story attached to this particular effort. A partridge-pigeon "double" may not be rare, but the conditions under which this one was made remain as clear in my mind as if it occurred but yesterday. It was a wild winter's afternoon, and, after lunch, the guns lined a hedge that ran in a semi-circle a third of the way down an exposed hill, cropped with turnips. In front of the stands, the flat hill-top was visible, but the advancing line of beaters would not appear on the skyline until it had almost come within range of the guns. A mile and a half away, the beaters would be strung out half-moon-shape, in order to have flankers well forward on either side, so that a broad sweep of ground could be driven towards a narrow base along which the guns were spaced.

For a time all was quiet. Presently a pigeon or two rose from the roots, to settle again. Then more and more pigeon came up to circle and, as one passed over the guns, someone fired—when things began to happen. In no time, it seemed, thousands of pigeon were in the air, and, as one or two shots were fired at birds passing over, the line of guns was spotted by the immense flock. This flock, then, was hemmed in between the stands and the beating line, and, since it seemed that the wind was blowing in several directions at one and the same time, it started to circle, then to revolve madly as some birds flew this way and some that. A whistle shrilled and one or two big coveys began to come forward, but, as pigeon were whirling about at all altitudes, like a vast shower of leaves, the birds seemed to lose their sense of direction, and we saw the strange sight of coveys rising high with the pigeon and half-circling and flying in all directions. There might have been a whirlwind on that hill-top in which partridges and pigeon were caught up together and swept skywards. Never before, or since, have I seen anything like it. The stormy background of sky in front of the stands was a mass of

flying forms that it made one almost giddy to watch. I remember how I left the pigeon well alone, concentrating on the coveys, but presently a single partridge came over, and this I downed, turning the second barrel on to a pigeon overhead. One would hardly believe that partridges being driven as they were would be snatched from their more usual lines of flight, to be swept up among a swirling host of pigeon. There were, however, not hundreds of the latter, but thousands, circling, diving, jinking and merely flying as if lost. To add to the confusion, several pheasants were also in the air, and these, too, seemed to think the world had gone mad. We used to reckon on killing between ten and twenty brace of birds at this stand, but on this occasion about half the number expected were gathered.

Usually, on a downland shoot in winter, when pigeon were about in varying quantities, the guns were warned to leave these birds well alone. With partridges wild, and beaters taking in immense drives of open, sheep-fed ground, a shot at pigeon might well spoil a good drive. Coveys, flushed by the beating line, would often come forward, to settle in sight of the hurdle-butts, and a shot then at a mere pigeon might easily have the effect of causing covey after covey to break in the wrong direction—to face the flag-waggers on the flanks, or to go right away back over the centre of the beaters. Likewise, pheasants running forward along hedge-rows, or through what little cover there was, might quickly go into reverse on noting a shot being fired from a butt in front of them.

And writing of flag-waggers—those beaters on the flanks armed with flags—only the most experienced of men were employed thus at that time of year, when cover was conspicuous by its absence and coveys wild and willing to fly great distances. It would, indeed, surprise your lowland shooter, who is used to marking down birds in the next field, or the field after that, to see how far downland partridges will carry on, especially on, say, a windy November day. Often I have watched a covey, or the plural, about to settle, when a man stationed on a rise on the flank has shown his flag too quickly, or too obviously, with the result that the birds have carried on over the boundary, to be lost for the

day. A good flag-man may not need to use anything but his "folded" flag on a winter's day, yet must be prepared to unfold it in emergency only when his instinct and common sense tell him that its judicious use is called for. Of great importance are the duties of these flankers and sometimes everything depends upon them to make the drive a success. Not every sportsman, by any manner of means, has the opportunity of shooting downland birds, yet the art of the flag-wagger apply also to small-farm shoots, if in somewhat lesser degree.

December 7th.

There is something very satisfying about stocking your own larder as a result of your own tireless efforts, and about growing and preparing your own vegetables—especially in war-time. If She-of-the-Kitchen is a good cook, and your appetite is naturally a healthy one, so much the better. Last night, for instance, I returned with a couple of rabbits, two snipe and a partridge. The rabbits were paunched before I hung them in the larder and the snipe were immediately plucked, cooked and eaten. This morning, before it was light, and after having lit the fires, I skinned one rabbit, disjointed it and left it in water on the kitchen table. Then, as it slowly grew light, I fetched a spade from the tool-shed and dug up a root of celery, half a dozen leeks, pulled some turnips and carrots and returned to the house. The rabbit pie contained bacon, turnips, carrots, celery and shallots. Eaten with leeks, potatoes and brussels sprouts, it was delicious. In fact, at this time of year I see to it that rabbit pie appears on the menu at least once a week. Sometimes the breasts of pigeon or plover are added. I can enjoy rabbit pie in a restaurant (particularly if the rabbit was hutch-bred and fed) and I can also enjoy a rabbit pie made of bought rabbit and bought vegetables. But I confirm that there is nothing to touch the home-shot, home-grown, self-prepared produce that has been produced and collected by the sweat of one's own brow and cooked by the partner of one's choice.

Nor is the dog forgotten, that faithful, hard-working hound that lay and sunned itself on the garden path while

one dug and planted the ground, and that played such a prominent part in the finding, flushing and retrieving of the game. For it are reserved the ribs, forelegs and head of the rabbit, cooked, taken from the bone and mixed with gravy and vegetables left over (if any) and household scraps. Perhaps the rabbit had a spotted liver; if so, this, too, is cooked for canine consumption, but a good liver goes into the pie, together with the kidneys.

As the heart of man may be touched through his stomach, let us, before leaving such a pleasant subject as food, take a peep into the larder of my humble abode. There are rows of pots and jars containing home-made jams and marmalade. This green tomato chutney is a real treat, and some of you may be interested in the stone jars of pickled walnuts and pickled shallots. Stored away, in attic, shed and clamp are apples, pears, potatoes, onions, shallots and beetroot. The countryman who starves deserves to do so, for surely it will be idleness that brings him to such an unhappy state. Coal you cannot dig from your garden, but the field-side hedges and the woods and copses yield firewood for the asking and the taking. Beer you can no longer brew, but there are home-made wines for those who like them, produced from the herbs and roots of the fields, hedgerows and gardens.

Every country boy should learn to be useful—to be a handyman and do things for himself, whether he is brought up at the rate of two thousand a year, or one hundred. If of the former enviable (?) state, he can never say when the tide of fortune will turn, and instead of being waited upon, he may have to paunch and skin his own rabbits, pluck and draw his own game, build his own pigsties, fowl-houses and kennels, till his own soil and lay and light his own fires. Perhaps he may even have to do his own cooking! I have, in fact, more than one friend, brought up in comparative wealth, who is now content to administer to his own needs and comforts and yet contrives to remain in excellent health and enjoy a variety of sport. Poor men perhaps from a “worldly” point of view, yet rich in satisfaction and contentment, and gleaning untold wealth from the resources of Nature. Of course, theirs is not “everybody’s” life, but

why should they care who follow the dictates of their own minds?

These December mornings, when they are fine and cold, put fresh vigour into one. There, on the headland, Bill is yoking his team to the plough, while against the pale green and yellow sky thousands of plover wheel in formation, filled with the wild rapture of living. The newly-turned plough has attracted the rook-flocks and the rich brown soil is studded with black feeding specks. Small flocks of larks are darting over the field, with lively twitters. Thrushes are singing, as they sing on a spring morning. Indeed, it might well be a morning of spring, except then the plover would not be in immense flocks, the larks would be aloft, singing each his own song, while the sticky plough-land would be a carpet of verdant green shoots, a playground for courting hares and partridges.

Down by the brook, the naked willows stand sentinel over the dead and frosted rush beds up which the water is slowly creeping as recent rainfall filters through the uplands and after trickling down the field drains, runs into the ditches, finally emptying itself into the muddy waters of the brook itself. In low-lying spots the water stands in silver pools. On one a moorhen sails, while an odd green plover stands sleepily by the margin. A sick bird, perhaps, or one sufficiently old to be excused the regular and arduous drills undertaken by those big flocks strung out against the horizon, or bunched together like a cloud of smoke, appearing and disappearing on turn with the precision of a single bird.

On the headland, Bill has started his team afield, the polished share cutting as straight a furrow as can be. Slowly he plods behind the plough—mile after mile. Over forty years of ploughing in all sorts of weather and on all manner of soils have bent his shoulders a little and his hands on the wooden handles are wrinkled and hard. With their mania for speed and the modern craze for hustle, it would do many of our young men good to spend a day or two behind the plough and those two big chestnuts that seem to move with a leisure akin to that of a travelling slug with nowhere in particular to go. Yet acre after acre of ground is turned and field after field prepared for the harrow and the drill. “Slow

but sure " is the motto of the farm hand who is master of his job and captain of his soul.

December 11th.

Meeting three local farmers, I said to them: " Now, look here, there are hundreds of pigeon feeding on your root-tops and on the marrow-stem kale and each one of you has suggested that I should go and shoot them. I have a roaring cold (the first for a twelve-month) and I don't feel like lugging hurdles about in the snow to make a hide, so who will be the first to offer to draw a shepherd's hut into the fields so that I can sit in it and shoot to my heart's content and to his advantage?" There being no offers, I fear I laid down the law a bit concerning the apathy of those concerned, for I knew that huts were available and also that the pigeon were feeding on open ground with no cover for hundreds of yards.

However, there is no better cure for a cold than a " mouch " in a blizzard, and so, in the afternoon, I sallied forth, wading knee-deep through snowdrifts and well aware that it was freezing hard. Barely had I left my cottage when some forty-odd geese came flying straight towards me, not thirty yards high. Down I went in the snow, telling the hound in no uncertain language to do the same. The perfect wedge of great birds came on, but, for some reason I could not fathom, turned slightly and passed us at over a hundred yards. Sadly I watched them disappear into a solid curtain of flying snow-flakes.

In the lane the snow had drifted, and the deep ditch on my right was no longer visible. Jokingly, I ordered the hound to range where it had been and next instant he was floundering in the snow, slipping gradually deeper and deeper. It was some minutes before I was able to rescue him, but at last we were on our way again, making slow progress towards the fields a half-mile distant. As the white flakes whirled about us and settled on the gun barrels they immediately froze, until the steel became encased in " glass." Through the storm, I could see a great flock of rooks settled on and about three corn stacks, and could guess what damage they were doing to the thatch, and how they

were pulling the stalks and ears from the sheaves. Several coveys of partridges could be plainly seen, like tortoises crawling on a clean sheet, and one or two hares were sitting up or lolloping about, somewhat disturbed by the unusual circumstances. Charity, we are told, is cold, but this afternoon was a good deal colder than charity. Yet under the old shooting coat and two pullovers, I felt far too warm. The struggle through the snow, dragging up one leg after another from the drifts, was exercise with a capital E.

Having reached a clump of elms beside the brook, I fired a shot into the air, and, straining half-closed eyes into the whirligig of falling flakes, I presently saw a flock of pigeon coming straight up into the trees. The first barrel accounted for one pigeon; the second was a miss—and not surprisingly so. The stricken bird half-fell, half-flew on to the ice on the far side of the brook, and I wondered if it would be at all “retrievable.” There was fairly thick ice extending for three yards or so from both banks, but the centre showed water. Should one risk the life of a good companion for a dead pigeon? Definitely no, I say, yet a possibility is a temptation to some of us. Willows had been cut hard by and with a pole I broke a channel in the thickest ice on my side, and by repeated plunges and attempts the hound smashed the thinner ice leading to the open channel. “Go to it,” I ordered him, for if he failed to land on the other side I felt I could call him back and direct him to the channel we had made. Over he went, like the good ‘un he is, and for some minutes he battled with the ice on the far side, clawing it, breaking it with his weight, and, eventually, after one or two full immersions, crashing a way through until, with a last desperate effort, he managed to get a foothold and pull himself on to the bank. It was an easy matter now to gather the fallen pigeon and plunge with it into the stream, and straight to hand he brought it, being directed and encouraged by me with a gradually cracking voice.

Further up the brook an old heron rose from a spot where the ice had been broken under the bank. Up he sailed, then hovered like a kestrel in the snow-filled sky, waiting for us

to pass on so that he could return to his lawful occasions. Nowhere did we see a duck, and it was not until we had tramped on for more than a mile that we came to a large flock of pigeon sitting on a patch of kale. There was only one way to approach them. "Downing" the hound, I crept towards them on hands and knees and was able, after much painful crawling, to knock over two sitting with the first barrel and one flying with the second.

Thereafter luck deserted us, and presently we set a course for home, right into the full force of the storm. Tying a handkerchief round my neck to lessen the pain of a chafing collar, I put down my head and almost staggered across country, hoping to hit the line of a patch of swedes on the way. This I did, but could not get within shot of the pigeon feeding on the tops. Bagging for the ferrets an old rook that appeared suddenly out of the grey background, I battled, with eyes almost closed, against the bitter wind and blinding snow, and was not sorry when at long last we reached the village. Nor, I think, was the hound disappointed to see a good fire burning and to rid himself of the frozen snow that encased his curly coat. Warmed up, however, we agreed that it had been a grand afternoon, and with some satisfaction I emptied the crops of the slain birds before hanging them up in the larder.

In these days of rationing, pigeon come in exceedingly useful and may be cooked in several ways which make them most palatable. Personally, I prefer them in a casserole, with odds and ends of meat and with plenty of vegetables. And I thank my lucky stars that last year I grew more than the usual number of shallots and garnered not a bad crop of onions! I wish, however, that I had been less generous with the latter, for verily the much-libelled onion is now worth its weight in gold.

December 14th.

Having to make a somewhat lengthy journey, and wondering if a deep fall of snow might not force me to stay away from home for a few days, it became necessary to lay up a store of dead sparrows with which the ferrets and two

kittens might be supplied in my absence. Accordingly, I arranged for an hour of minor shooting-sport. Unfortunately, my old B.S.A. air-rifle, with which I accomplished much execution over fourteen years, had met with a fatal accident. Never had I missed a gun more. Howbeit, a kindly neighbour lent me one even older than my old favourite, and I took up position in the bedroom, leaving the window open just a crack, and settled down to watch the few trees in range.

Already there was a good covering of snow, but somehow the tops of the tall privet hedges were fairly clear. Along these a number of blackbirds and thrushes were busy feeding from the black berries, and, as I watched, two missel-thrushes and a cock bullfinch joined in the feast. Then a cock sparrow chose to settle on a laburnum and, in a few seconds, had dropped dead in the snow beneath. Almost immediately a hen, probably deceased's wife, flew on to a lower branch and peered at the body. 'She, too, hit the ground. I did not count my shots and I made few misses, but while the collection of dead sparrows grew, the blackbirds and thrushes continued to fly from, and return to, the privet hedges, braving the danger in a manner that revealed their great hunger.

Then came the pick-up. The hound, anxiously watching operations at my side, nearly fell down the steep stairs in an effort to get to the front door first. Released into the snow, he quickly gathered one bird after another, quite forgetful that 'neath the white carpet lay flower-beds upon which he would not have dared to trespass under ordinary circumstances. Thereafter, three neat bundles of sparrows were hung on nails in the larder shelf—would they had been partridges, or even snipe!

One night later I rode back by moonlight along a lonely road well covered with snow and the frozen tracks of earlier traffic. One or two falls marked my progress. On my right was a narrow fringe of firs; on my left a vast unending flatness of snow over which a quarter-moon shone fitfully in a sky promising a further fall. In the deep silence, the crunching of ice under the tyres of my bicycle sounded

greatly exaggerated. I saw a hare sitting close to a hay-rick—a hare that looked almost as large as a fox. It sat there as I passed within fifteen yards, apparently conscious of the absence of danger.

It was nearly another mile on that I saw slowly advancing across the white plain towards the road what I was certain was a fox. I thought, indeed, that we should about meet if neither of us slackened pace. The slight, cutting wind, I had noted, was in the north-east; it bit against the back of my ears and neck and would probably carry a warning to the fox. Less than twenty yards from the road the creature came to a halt, then turned at right-angles and made off parallel to my own course. Putting on pressure, I was rapidly overhauling it, when front and back wheels decided to slide in opposite directions and I found myself on my back with the bicycle on top of me. The fox carried on, presently to cross the road and vanish into the firs. Now, skilled in detailed observation, I would have bet my bottom dollar that this creature of the night, travelling across country, was indeed a fox. Its outline and every visible mannerism shouted Reynard. Yet, when I came to the spot where it had crossed my path I examined its footprints and knew at once that my fox was, in fact, a dog—most probably a collie. This minor incident may seem of little interest, yet every keeper and woodcraftsman will know the feeling of frustration that was mine. I was capable at that minute of believing that here was an animal of the fairy-story book, or of legend, capable of turning itself into something else. Fortunate for me (and it) that I was no armed vulpicide; the ground, however, was too hard, too obviously white to dispose of a body, though I am well aware that a certain type of individual is not averse to carrying out damage to such a body and casting it in the roadway that a passing motorist may be blamed. Many a cat has been disposed of in this way; so also dogs and foxes.

To turn from such horrific thoughts, I saw an unusual sight a few nights later. I was standing at a lonely station, glancing up at the sky, when five mallard passed over, little more than house-high. At that moment an engine driver opened the door of his furnace, and a great glare lit up

everything. Had an artist been present to capture the impression of those duck illuminated by the broad, eerie column of red light, he might indeed have painted a picture remarkable for its unusual setting and beauty.

December 18th.

Saturday, being a "day off," it was impressed on me that the morrow was the Sabbath and that the larder was bare. And even while this gentle hint was being delivered, I was gazing out of the window on a white world and on the small flocks of pigeon that were diving on to a field of green stuff not many hundreds of yards from my door. My reply was an instant call to action. In less than ten minutes I was out on the edge of a great field where patches of cabbage, brussels sprouts and turnip-tops peeped through the snow.

There were hundreds of pigeon either flying round or settled to feed, but in the whole of that white waste was no hide of any sort, except poles at intervals as some protection against the landing of hostile aircraft. Yet, strangely enough, what better hide than one of these? Taking up position against one, and now, thanks to war-time rationing, almost hidden by it, I waited patiently for the return of the pigeon.

As to the hound that accompanied me, I had plucked a few turnip leaves and covered him with them, adding some handfuls of snow for good effect. For a short while he bore with this indignity, but, my first shot causing him to turn sharply, he came all undressed. Necessity, however, being the mother of invention, I took from my pocket a couple of yards or so of string and, tying bunches of leaves along it at intervals, finally wound it round the patient hound and added further rations of snow.

For a time all went well. Birds began drifting back and several came nicely in range. Five had fallen when a sixth, coming over high, was hard hit and began a long glide towards the ground. Realising that it would touch down at least two hundred yards away, I said to my companion, who was anxiously watching it, "Go to it!" I had forgotten for the moment that he was hardly dressed to run,

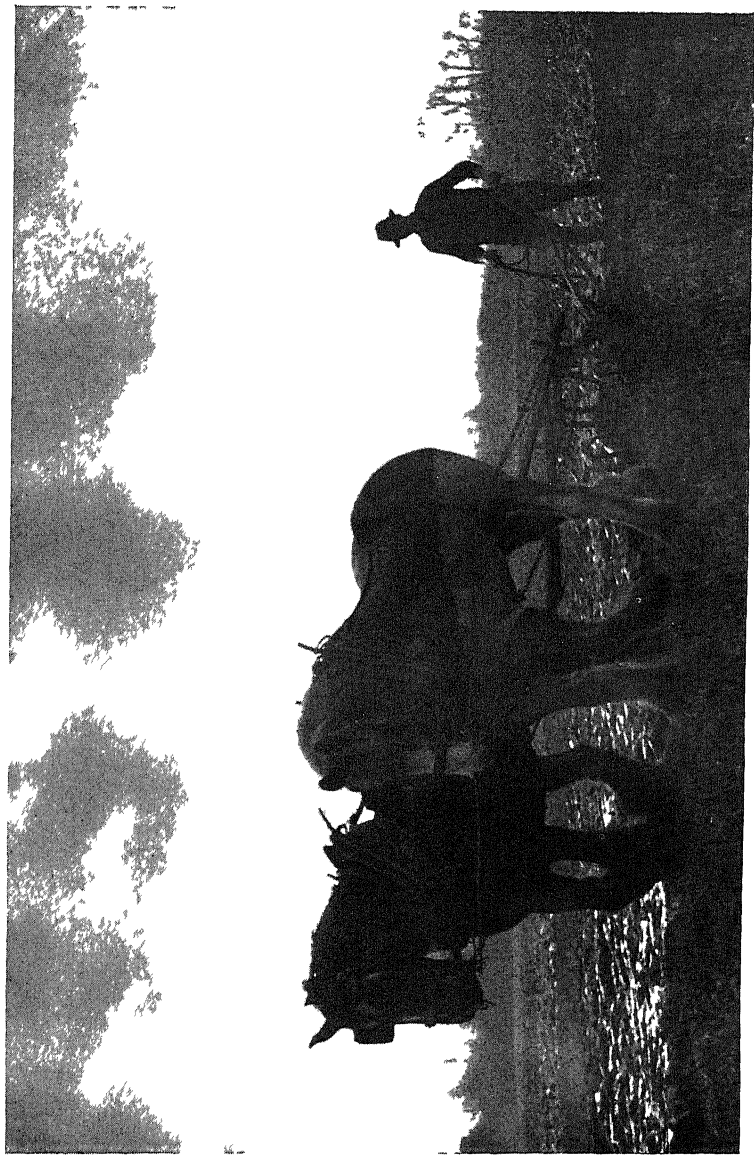
but run he did and what a queer figure he looked in his decorations !

With eight pigeon in the bag and a dozen empty cartridge cases lying about, we were forced to make tracks for home, in order to keep a 2.30 appointment with a friend bent on hunting up river and flood-water for duck. At the farmhouse, at which we arrived to the minute, I borrowed a pair of Wellingtons and off we set in the car, three of us and the hound, to an agreed point in the plan of campaign.

With two of us concealed near the river, the third party made a wide detour, finally " driving " the river towards the ambush. Unfortunately, only two duck came our way, both being handsomely missed. Three big lots of mallard rose from under the willows, but all made away over the river, followed by several teal.

The next act was another " drive " (this time taking in some acres of flood-water on which duck could be seen through the glasses) over our host, he taking up position in a clump of low willows. This turned out something of a fiasco. To reach his stand he had to walk round by road, enter a spiked gate and wade over knee-deep through fifty yards of water. We gave him ample time, and, believing we saw him squatting at his appointed place, started walking towards him. On the way across I managed to down two teal that shot overhead and an odd pigeon. As the shots crashed out, a score or more of mallard and several lots of teal went winging over the willows, but there came no sound of shooting. It appears that our host had been waylaid on a matter of business as he proceeded along the road, and then discovered the spiked gate had been locked. The old willow stump we had mistaken for him would certainly have made a grand " stand " !

After that, we took up various positions along the river to wait for fighting duck. For two hours we waited coatless in the driving rain. As dusk finally turned to darkness I discovered that the floods had risen and that I was now forced to wade some distance with water well over (and in) my Wellingtons. Meanwhile, however, to the previous " bag " had been added a cock pheasant the hound had



KITCHEN FRONT
“On the headland, Bill has started his team afield.”



IN A BLIZZARD

"In these days of rationing, pigeon came in exceedingly useful."

flushed from a hedge, one duck and a snipe. Some might say a dreary ending to an otherwise pleasant afternoon.

December 22nd.

An afternoon at the pigeon presented itself. The great "wash-out" had occurred, and, instead of a snow-bound countryside with a good crust of frozen matter underneath, the fields were soft and sticky and many of the meadows under flood. Yesterday, the pigeon had flocked to the green stuff showing above the snow; to-day, so an old carter had informed me, yon clover was blue with thousands of the birds. Accordingly, I set out on the mile walk down slushy lanes to the site of this new invasion, working out in mind how I should later parcel out the kill to friends, for I felt that a big bundle of pigeon was already as good as in the bag.

Along the hedge by the brook meadow I crawled, and presently, sure enough, I came in sight of an immense flock of feeding birds carpeting the stubble on the big field that was the last of the chain on Mr. H's land. Taking up position behind a willow at the foot of which grew a thorn bush, I took careful note of how the land lay and watched birds flying up and settling again every few minutes. None, alas, was in range, but I judged that, presently, some would fly over me and the resultant shots would get the flock on the move. Alternatively, it seemed probable that someone, possibly the cowman bringing food for his beasts, would put the pigeon on wing, causing them to circle in my direction. However, such was not to be, and unbelievably, I was forced to wait nearly four hours before I fired a shot to kill.

Having bided in patience for nearly an hour, and by that time beginning to feel the keen, biting wind, despite ample clothing, I expended the contents of a cartridge into the air, hoping that the shock would send the startled birds over me. What it did, unhappily, was to cause the whole flock to rise, top the boundary hedge, and to settle out in a large field on land into which I dare not venture. So, failing disturbance by someone else, I settled down in the knowledge that, at worst, I would have to wait until the pigeon had finished

feeding, when they were certain to make for roost in a big wood a mile in my rear, passing over my stand on their way.

And this is exactly what did happen. Not a pigeon came within shot until it grew dusk and I was about frozen. Then along came four birds, one of which I dropped, and I was just able to account for three more as the flock tore overhead, the rustle of their wings making grand music. The crops of the two woodies were crammed with clover and charlock seed; those of two stock doves were, curiously enough, bulging with small field beans—sixty-five being taken from one and thirty-four from the other.

Only one outstanding incident brightened that bitter afternoon. For an hour or more I watched two kestrels on the hunt, one eventually catching a small bird, or mouse, and carrying it on to the thatch of a single hayrick to consume.

Shortly after the kestrels had departed, I heard the chackling of a magpie and three of these birds, being blown about by the wind and almost losing control of their long rudders, came into view, passing within twenty-five yards of the rick. Suddenly, one of them spied the leavings of the kestrel and broke formation, to pounce on the thatch. The other two continued for a bit, then turned and joined their companion. For quite half-an-hour I watched the little scene from a distance. The pied birds ran and hopped all over the rick, every few minutes returning to whatever pickings the kestrel had left. At last, and still full of play, they took to the air, chasing each other, diving and chackling in a rare display of aerobatics.

December 24th.

There can be few country boys for whom certain hollow trees have not held fascination. When we were very young, some of them were believed to be the hiding places of "old men" who would jump out at one and heaven alone knows what awful consequences this would bring about! As a lad brought up in a small Essex village where a certain amount of superstition existed, I, in common with my playmates, had a healthy regard for these mysterious "old men" who

seemed to lurk in dark and out-of-the-way places, and there were at least two cottages (one away in the fields), which we never passed by without a furtive glance, wherein dwelt witches. One harmless old lady who lived by herself used to make a little pocket money by charming warts, but she also retained something of the reputation of a genuine witch even among adults.

As one grew older and braver, hollow trees become excellent hiding places when hide-and-seek was being played, for younger members of the party were often frightened to approach them; and we even kept hidden certain personal treasures in such places. Still later, hollow trees took on a new interest. We learned to connect them with hiding places of owls and even foxes. The snoring of barn owls, heard as dusk deepens, or after dark, is a terrifying sound until one knows definitely from what innocent creature it emerges, and perhaps that awesome noise, heard round farm buildings and hollow trees, may have been the foundation for the "old man" beliefs of our boyhood.

I remember once climbing a tree the top part of which was hollow, to investigate its possibilities. Arriving at a precarious foot-hold, I nearly fell to the ground as a brown owl flew out and flapped about my head in a vicious attack. I managed to ward it off with an arm, but my position became less secure on receiving a bang on the back from a stone thrown at the owl by a companion on the ground. In due course we fetched a ladder and found, as we had all along suspected, that Mrs. Owl was brooding a family.

On another occasion (during more recent years) a keeper companion and I were searching the estate for little owls, and I climbed a pollarded black poplar to a hollow at the top. Instantly, a barn owl did a bunk from this, whitewashing me almost from head to foot as she left—a not uncommon method of attack, or rather defence, of these birds. Certainly the episode caused the onlooker much amusement. On another day, this same keeper was waiting at the foot of a hollow tree up which I had climbed, when I told him that a large poaching cat for which we had sought for many days was in the tree and I would do my best to

bolt it. My operations were so successful that Grimalkin came shooting out from his hide, nearly dislodging me, and was down the bole and into a field below as quickly as one could say "knife." A well-aimed charge of No. 5 shot, however, was even faster.

Old parkland giants are often rich in bird life, and I have known owls, jackdaws, kestrels, starlings, tits and sparrows to nest in the same tree.

In a cottage I vacated a few years ago stood the rotting trunk of an elm that had broken off half-way down. A few hours' work from a cavity at the bottom, and I had pulled an enormous pile of rotten wood from the interior and emerged at the top! On this I built a small, strong platform and placed a ladder inside the trunk. From this seat of operations I shot scores of pigeon which used to flight regularly over my small garden.

If you want to see some fun, I hope you will one day come across a scene I have twice witnessed—that of a green woodpecker chased into a hollow tree by a hawk. Instead of staying quietly put, the woodpecker will run round the inside of the tree, apparently hoping to escape by a back entrance. Every time it pokes its head out, however, the hawk, circling the tree, makes a dive in its direction, and all the time the silly yaffle yells blue murder, as though it were already being plucked alive by the enemy.

I recall one awful tragedy of a hollow stump set in a hedge on the edge of a deep ditch. An old man from a neighbouring village was going home one night rather the worse for wear, when he tripped over some empty lime sacks and injured his ankle. Used to rough living (his home was a tumble-down shed), he gathered up some of the sacks and crawled through the water of the ditch and up into the hollow stump. Being "fuddled," he was evidently unaware of the danger of what he was doing. Soaked to the skin, and muffled in the lime sacks, he passed to eternity and his body was discovered several days later.

I, myself, nearly met with an accident when, standing on the saddle of a horse I was riding, I foolishly put my arm down a hole in a tree in an attempt to reach some jackdaw's eggs. As I did so, the horse walked away, and it was only

by pure luck that I managed to grab a stray bough with the other hand and that a companion was handy to lead the horse back under me.

On another occasion, when a boy, I climbed a broken tree in the top of which a kestrel had nested several feet down. Attempting to reach the eggs, I over-balanced and fell into the hollow with my legs in the air. It was some time before, bruised and scratched, I managed to recover my position—a lesson well and truly learned! Hollow trees may be a strange subject for a brief essay, but I believe I could write a book about them. Nor have they ever lost their fascination for me.

December 27th.

There are many simple and necessary rules laid down concerning ferreting. The tyro is told not to walk about on the burrow to be ferreted; not to stand upwind of the place so that his scent is blown into the holes; not to smoke; above all, not to move about once the ferrets are entered, or rabbits, coming to the entrance of the holes, may catch sight of him and return down the burrow, to be killed, or cornered by a ferret. These, and other simple and obvious laws of the game should be carefully studied.

Often, however, the more experienced ferreter is at fault, or does not fully appreciate exactly what is afoot when certain things occur. For instance, the ferret, or ferrets, are entered, and for many minutes nothing happens. Perhaps ten minutes, perhaps twenty, pass by without a rabbit or ferret being seen. Then the ferreter begins to get restless. Obviously, he reasons, the ferret has either killed, or is, scratching at the rump of a rabbit that has tucked itself up a dead-end. His natural desire is to creep to the burrow and to listen down various holes, in the hope that he will be able to hear something of what is happening down the dark interior. He attempts, by "squeaking" to draw out the ferret, or he fetches the liner, buckling collar and line about its neck prior to putting it into active service. I am writing now of the ferreter out for sport; not the professional rabbit-catcher who thinks and works in terms of commission and whose technique may be quite different.

When a ferret has disappeared for many minutes, it is reasonable to assume that it is "on" a rabbit, and is either killing and tasting it, or scratching at the rump of one that has tucked itself up and refuses to bolt. But, in the meantime, what of the other inmates of the burrow? These should not be forgotten. The ferret has probably passed down many of the tunnels of the big burrow and the draught has blown its scent along others. There is, therefore, consternation and even panic among the rabbits. If, then, the ferreter keeps quite still and forgets for a time the actual or probable activities of his ferret, he may well be rewarded by the sight of a rabbit, or rabbits, attempting to slip quietly from the burrow, thoroughly scared by the scent of ferret and the suggestive sounds going on under the ground. A rabbit issuing thus, seldom, if ever, leaves in a hurry. It comes to the mouth of the hole, listening attentively and working its nose, attempting to make quite certain that the coast is clear. The smallest movement of the waiting ferreter will cause it immediately to turn and dart back, and it may not bolt again, even though the ferret presently gets upon its track. A rabbit sitting at the mouth of the hole and finding everything quiet outside, will suddenly decide to make a bolt for it, and it is then that it can be bowled over. Never shoot at it as it sits framed in its doorway, for it is quite possible that the ferret is coming up behind it, when both creatures will share the charge of shot. A friend, ferreting with me one season, took this risk, and a really fine worker was killed, and regrets, however sincere, hardly make up for such a loss. I have shot four out of five rabbits from a big burrow into which only one ferret has been entered, as they attempted to slip away in this manner, when all the time the ferret had killed somewhere in the earth, and its scent and the sound of worry had been the cause of the rabbits deciding to leave.

Impatience is one of the bugbears of ferreting and all too often leads to small bags, trouble underground, and plenty of unnecessary work with the spade. One of the chief secrets of successful ferreting is to own one or two good ferrets (sell the rogues to someone you don't like!), and feed them in the proper manner. Overfed ferrets become lazy and quickly tire. Hungry ferrets will kill, and perhaps

hours be wasted while they satisfy their hunger on the kills. While well-kept ferrets must have a certain amount of "blood"—that is, flesh—I always give mine, on the morning of working, a small bowl of bread and milk. Thus, while they hunt, and perhaps kill, for the pleasure of the sport, they do not tend to stay long with a capture. A good ferret, indeed, will leave a kill almost at once, though it may stay scratching at a live rabbit that it cannot shift, for a quarter of an hour or so. Then it emerges, is picked up, has the fleck cleaned from its claws and is entered elsewhere. A ferret that has obvious vice and is untrustworthy, even though fed in the right manner, is best parted with, or even knocked on the head.

I like, when possible, to buy ferrets from amongst those the working qualities of which I have witnessed. It is well worth while to pay a little more for youngsters out of a good working bitch by a good liner or small working dog, than pay less for an unknown quality. And should you see your ferreting companion snatching at the ferrets, or picking them up by the tails, see to it that he leaves them well alone in future. Ferrets are sensitive and sensible little creatures, and many a good, quiet worker is ruined by such treatment. Remember also that ferrets, like certain people I know, quickly acquire a thirst. Either take with you a small bottle of watered-down milk, or allow them periodical access to clean ditch water.

December 31st.

A white world and a frozen one, and this morning a "pea-souper." As the car bumped and skidded its way slowly down the snow-covered lane towards the river meadows our spirits fell, for surely the fog was getting thicker and we should get little shooting, except, perhaps, at a few semi-starved pigeon moping in the trees. Approaching the bottom of the lane, I bid my companion and driver halt the car a hundred yards from the gateway, for I thought it possible that the cows having been driven from the meadows to the farm to be milked would have broken the ice in the gateway and churned up the mud, and that there we should find a few feeding snipe. Whether, however, we

could get a shot at the birds as they disappeared into the fog without taking low, risky shots was another matter. A little hand-and-foot warming, a nip each out of the flask (thermos!) and we walked slowly forward towards the gate. Apparently there was "nothing doing," but as we relaxed, a little jack snipe rose almost at our feet. I fear that the two barrels fired at it were aimed in the direction it had taken rather than at the bird itself, for the latter became invisible shortly after it rose. Nevertheless, the hound was sent out and returned with the feathered morsel, which I stowed away in my pocket.

While the fog persisted there was only one thing to be done—to walk along the hedgerows in the hope that we might surprise pigeon sitting in the trees, or feeding on the ivy-berries. The good snipe-holding ditch under the hedge was frozen over and covered with snow, so that there would be no snipe there to-day, although, as we walked along, it was evident by their tracks in the snow that they had paid the place a visit, hoping no doubt to find a patch or two of open water. Indeed, it had been my habit to keep the ice broken here and there to attract snipe, but I had been away for a few days and had accordingly been unable to attend to matters.

Half-way along the first hedge we halted, for, straining eyes ahead, we saw twenty or thirty pigeon clustered in an elm. They were puffed out, and looked as large as turkeys. Sneaking closer under cover of the fence, we agreed to take certain birds and then let go at our targets, firing each a second barrel as the startled pigeon disappeared into the fog. We were lucky in getting three birds apiece, and as we stood still we presently heard the whisper of approaching wings and the pigeon, seemingly lost to the sense of direction, came bang over us and three more of their number fell. By the time we had walked to the end of our ground, fourteen pigeon figured in the bag, and, much to our surprise, they were in pretty good order. Except for one or two, the crops of which contained a few ivy-berries, they had not fed.

When we reached the river we had a pleasant surprise. In order to smash the ice, those responsible for regulating the water had held it back at the weirs so that it forced the

ice up, then the sluice gates had been opened and the level of the water fell considerably and tons of ice came drifting rapidly downstream, roaring and scraping as it tobogganed along under that which still remained. Much of the ice beside the banks had caved in, leaving muddy shelves among the grass and decayed rushes, and here the snipe had gathered. As we walked along the bank they sprang away from such spots and flew out over the water, rising quickly to a safe angle of fire. We killed four and a half couple on the way back, and each bird had to be retrieved by the hound from the ice-cold water. We had agreed not to shoot any bird that would fall on dangerous ice, or where it would be impossible for a dog to fetch it. Some we shot fell on thick ice; others in open water, but, such was the state of the river that each retrieve was a triumph in itself, for, even in open water, the current was terrific and full of drifting ice-floes. We also gathered into the bag a hen pheasant and a teal, but badly "muffed" a shot at four duck that appeared suddenly out of the fog and as quickly disappeared into it.

It was useless walking the water-meadows for a chance at partridges. We did hear one lot calling, but shooting in a fog is a dangerous game where birds fly only cattle- and horse-high. At midday we sat on our game bags on the trunk of a fallen tree beside a spring, the ice of which we broke. Concealed by a clump of whitethorns, we hoped that passing snipe might drop down to feed; however, during the course of that snack only one shot was fired and that at a pigeon which swerved violently and was immediately swallowed up by the fog that was thickening every minute. So thick had it become that we decided to make it a day, and presently we were slip-sliding and bumping up the old lane between high hedges on which sat fieldfares, blackbirds and thrushes in scores. I made a mental note to come that way next day with the little .410, for a pie of "felts" has ever been my fancy.

As we crept up the lane, frozen footmarks could be seen crossing it—those of hares and rabbits, while two pheasants had evidently strolled that way, before the frost had crusted the snow, and gone through a gap in the hedge and into the

shelter of a patch of kale. Rats, too, had threaded the bottom of the fence, using as headquarters a disused gravel-pit on the far side. Before we had even reached the end of the lane, the fog had deepened so that the hedges were slowly being blotted out and the cold draught blowing in from the open windscreen made us long to finish the journey. However, despite the elements, we had made a good mixed bag, and certainly had enjoyed every minute of the morning. Even the hound, shivering beneath a rug in the back seat, licked his front contentedly, having no doubt understood our appreciation of his excellent work under most trying circumstances.

CHAPTER XIII.

PRE-WAR CAMEOS.

DID we once live in a world at peace. We did indeed, and to allow the mind, at times, to wander in retrospect is to look back on what seems also a world of good dreams.

There comes to me visions of Lyd's hill, with the line of partridge butts set a third of the way up, the guns waiting, patiently behind them, ears strained for the shrill of the keeper's whistle that announces partridges coming forward, eyes watching the skyline of the brow for the sight of the odd pheasant or skimming covey which at any moment might swing into view. Sometimes the birds came silently over the brow and down the slope, when a shot set them speeding the length of the butts. At other times, flagged on by "stops," or "outside" men, they left the plateau above and came over at a good height, difficult to identify among the fieldfares, the red-wings and the starlings also disturbed by the advancing line of beaters. Stationed behind a gun, I would watch an old cock, tipped in the wing, carry on with the wind in his tail, sinking slowly towards the hedge in the rear. Close to it, he would touch ground and run like a stag into its shelter. By the time the drive had finished there might be four pheasants and a partridge down in this hedge, and, leaving other pickers-up to work their own beats, off I would go with my hound, running across

the fallow towards that end of the hedge which joined the fir covert known as Baldon. The old dog, of course, had marked the birds down as keenly as the most hawk-eyed of pickers-up, and he knew from experience that winged birds, particularly pheasants, were likely to make towards the covert. Accordingly, I had no need to check him or direct him. Straight to the corner of the hedge he would go, then commence systematically to hunt it down. During the years we shot here he lost few birds, though he was occasionally forced to mark his quarry down in a rabbit burrow where it had sought sanctuary. Such birds had to be left, but we usually found them on one of the feeds during the next two days.

Amusedly, one late afternoon, we stood at the bottom of Lyd's and watched two enthusiastic young shots at the top, silhouetted against a wild sunset. Every now and again, down they would drop behind a couple of little juniper bushes. We knew what they were after, and were also aware that they would be disappointed. Their host had allowed them to remain while the rest of the party moved on for the last and shortest drive of the day—allowed them to remain in the hope that they would be able to catch some of our hand-reared duck as they returned to the covert near the dew-pond.

That afternoon we had given the guns a pleasant and unexpected surprise. Stationed at their stands in the valley they had looked eagerly forward to the best pheasant drive of the day. As the beaters advanced through the Riddle's covert far above them, a voice sounded on the wind, "Gentlemen, you may shoot a duck if you see one." The voices of beaters and the tapping of sticks could be faintly heard; a blackbird or two arrowed from the firs and crossed the valley; a minute or so of expectation and a cock, his tail askew as the side-wind caught it, came straight over the centre gun. Six shots sounded, but the old warrior passed safely over and presently stiffened his wings for a glide down.

It was now that most of the guns opened wide their eyes, for, watching several pheasants coming towards them, they also beheld an unexpected sight—forty or fifty duck heading

for the line, rising steeply and protesting at this disturbance to their peace. Came a rattle of musketry—a veritable “mad minute”—and the duck were over and past, others following breaking away to the flanks and swinging off to avoid danger. On that drive one duck was killed and another winged and picked up later. We had expected to line up over a hundred pheasants, but what with the wind, the height and speed of the birds, and the excitement of a shot at duck, only seventy were eventually hung across the poles on the game cart.

And for half-an-hour after that, those two young sportsmen waited on the hill-top, anxiously watching the circling specks. Every now and again a small lot of duck approached, straight towards the points where the guns were concealed, but, coming within a hundred yards of them, off they sheered, to make another circular tour of the low country. The last we saw of the scene were two guns walking side by side, looking somewhat dejected even in the distance, and every now and again turning to watch duck passing over the junipers they had left, to swing down among the firs and on to the pheasant feed from which the faint whistling of the old keeper floated on the wind.

It was on Lyd's, too, that I watched the Colonel down a pheasant. As the bird touched ground it ran uphill and along the brow towards the partridge sanctuary known as the Nursery. Letting his fat spaniel off the lead, the Colonel watched it panting uphill, apparently heading in a direction that would cut off the escape of the running bird. At long last the spaniel reached the brow, by which time the pheasant had passed the spot by some fifteen yards. “Now watch him,” bellowed Army, “did you ever see a finer bit of work?”

Did I ever? On reaching the hot line, the fat spaniel immediately got on the heel scent and went pounding and panting back along it, finally reaching the point where the game had touched down, when, utterly exhausted, it fell flat on the ground and absolutely ignored the bellows of an infuriated master.

On Lyd's on a Sunday morning, as we went to feed the pheasants, we watched a Montagu harrier diving and

flopping above the rough grass. Twice it pounced on and killed a squatting partridge, the first one almost on the same spot, it seemed, where a month before a buzzard had dropped on a Frenchman—also on a Sunday morning as we watched daylight break across the downs.

DOWNLAND SHOOT.

A summer of drought, and towards the end of August a neighbouring single-handed keeper, taking a cart-load of hurdle-butts on to the downs, fell and broke several ribs. "Could I finish the job for him, and carry on for a few weeks?" I could, and I did. With something like a dozen and a half lines of butts to be erected; with pheasants and partridges to feed; with a hundred and one other smaller matters to see to, there looked like being little rest ahead.

During the following days I made full use of the rickety old carrier's cart to transport the hurdles to the various "lines" allotted them, and hours of labour were spent in driving the crowbar into the iron-hard ground to form the holes into which the stakes supporting the hurdles must be "firmed." I lost a good deal of weight in the course of these operations, but, happily, I had the use of a motor-cycle so that at least once a day I could pop back to the village.

Came the morning when the last of the hurdles had been set up, and it only remained to cut bundles of beech twigs and arrange these along the top of each hurdle so that the face of the gun might be hidden from the view of approaching coveys. On that morning I did the round of all the butts on the downs, then came helter-skelter down to the village. "One for the road," and then on to the lower meadows to the three lines of butts erected there. Even here the ground was as hard as bricks, and judge of my feelings when, on entering the meadow by the brook, I discovered that a herd of cattle had been placed in it, and that, during the night, they had knocked down seven of the eight butts. However, in a keepering life one gets all too used to taking the bad luck with the good, and, as we should not be shooting for at least three weeks, I dragged the hurdles from the meadow, deciding to re-erect them later, interwoven with thorn bushes.

On my way back, for a bite at the cottage of the sick keeper, I had occasion to stop at the petrol pump of a garage at the foot of the downs. Waiting for the garage man to attend to me, I sat straddling the motor-bike and was interested in a policeman (a new man to me) scanning the hills through a pair of binoculars. Bidding him "Good morning," I asked him what he could see. Without lowering the glasses, he replied, "I can see that your licence expired a full week ago." Fortunately, although this was true, I had applied for a new one. Later, P.C. Alf and I became firm friends and co-operated in catching various two-legged vermin.

That autumn was one full of interest, for, much to my amusement, it was necessary for me to learn everything about the shoot—a shoot marching with our own. I discovered where birds had been fed and a great deal of other information which, in the ordinary course of events, would have been withheld from me. The idle chatter of locals helped in this respect, and for long afterwards I was in a position to "chip" my sick friend. Only those who understand the kind of position in which I found myself will fully appreciate my enjoyment, but, happily, although, in a way, the two shoots admitted a sense of rivalry, we were "all boys together" and used to visit and occasionally help each other, particularly on shooting days when we picked-up on each other's ground.

I have mentioned that I lost weight that summer. This fact was not surprising. There is little shelter on the open downs, and the hillsides are steep. Birds must be fed and traps visited daily. Since the introduction of the motor-car one must be here, there and everywhere, or owners of long-dogs will take advantage of one's absence to "lift" the hares which are plentiful and which give good runs where the downs are comparatively free from wire-fencing. Also picknickers and hikers with their dogs can do untold damage to nesting and sitting game.

Sundays and Bank Holidays are the most anxious time for the keeper in this respect, and he has also to watch out for fires. The long, coarse grass and the fir coverts during a dry period quickly catch fire, and we have put out several

only after difficulty. A smouldering spark has been left behind, either from a carelessly dropped cigarette-end, or from a picnic fire, and flames and smoke have issued long after those responsible have left the place.

Accordingly, the downland keeper must be ever on the alert ; must be of a naturally restless nature. He must slave all day under a burning sun, or maybe in a Scotch mist that soaks him to the skin. He must also be prepared for long spells of night-watching when the birds are in covert and he suspects, from information received, or for other reasons, that his coverts are under the observation of undesirable characters. He is, in fact, one with the stone-curlew and the wheatear; the grass-owl and the peregrine. He threads his way up steep slopes between the junipers and looks out over windswept, undulating country that appears bleak, even in summer, and on which, it might be thought, very little game exists. Yet we have walked the beaters off their legs round miles of grassland and killed our 150 brace of birds in a day. We have reared our thousands of pheasants and kept them at home. Hares are plentiful, and over a thousand have been shot in a two-day drive, and the last season I was connected with a downland shoot our books showed nearly seven thousand rabbits trapped, netted, shot and snared that year.

Hare Shoot.

Our annual downland hare shoots—shall we ever see the like again? I fear not. Long before the day fixed for the event, friends of tenant farmers concerned and those of the keepers sent or gave reminders that they hoped they would be invited. The result was that about thirty guns met on the great day—met in the yard of an inn the landlord of which, though “strict on hours” all the year round, was ever ready to take minor risks on this annual event. Consequently, everyone was able to fortify himself with a nip of something to warm the inner man before the party moved off, and there was a good deal of joking and friendly banter as a prelude to the more serious work of the day.

The charm of these hare drives—and charm there definitely was about them—lay, not in the useful killing of the hares, but in the friendly and jocular atmosphere that

prevailed, and in the invigorating air of the downs. It lay also in the reunion of friends who sometimes met only on this one occasion in the year, and in the grand lunch and "high tea," followed by an impromptu concert in the evening. Yes, we did things in great style, though of more recent years the gatherings became smaller and the feasting on a less generous scale.

The first drive of the day was always the same, and a very successful one it was, too. About fifteen guns laboured up the narrow chalk roadway, individuals falling out at intervals, to take cover among the rough grass of the bank. Fifteen other guns walked with the beaters, and, as I took the party on its wide detour, we used to kill a number of pigeon and sometimes golden plover. Guests new to these hare drives and unacquainted with the number of hares to be found among the folds of the downs, were amazed on seeing them running about between the lines of guns "for all the world like a flock of sheep." There is no doubt at all that steel helmets should have been issued to everyone, for I cannot, in all honesty, say that every gun present was a safe shot. It was rather the reverse, I fear, and while we never had a fatal, or even a serious accident, individuals sometimes got "peppered."

Albeit, whatever the fortune and the weather, when lunch time came, and we returned to the inn, climbing upstairs to the big room allotted to us, spirits were high and everyone was chatting and laughing with a freedom that was infectious. And what a cold lunch! Everything on the table that could appeal to the heart and stomach of hungry sportsmen after a morning on the downs! An hour of talking and feasting; a gamble on the day's bag; a toast or two and perhaps a song, and then back to the hills.

Three drives more (occupying two and a half hours); the viewing and counting of the bag; a "whip-round" for the keepers and beaters; the taking of two hares apiece—then into the cars and so to the next village where the "high-tea" would be served in due course at another inn. The "high-tea" consisted of two mountains of hot roast beef, one at each end of a long table, vegetables of several kinds and fruit tarts to follow. This meal was a long-drawn-out

affair, culminating in speeches, followed by stories and songs. That we all did ourselves well I do not deny, but, remember, this joyful occasion had to be such that it would last in memory until another year !

I fear in this chapter that I have dwelt on food and wine and song, rather than on the delights of environment and on the actual shooting of hares, with the difficult organisation of drives over wide areas of country. However, I have no doubt that, should any of those who enjoyed these days read this book, they will agree that, while the useful slaying of hares was the main object, these annual events will be remembered by their atmosphere of unadulterated bonhomie and by the many amusing episodes that occurred both on the field of battle and at the festive board. The fact that five hundred or more hares were killed in a day merely points to the value (nay, the necessity) of these drives. They were, in fact, very necessary, for hares do damage to crops, and too many hares lead to disease and heavy mortality among the stock.

Finally, I ask for a word of pity for the two of us who packed the hares into hampers next day and sent them off to Leicester, where there was a first-class market for them. I need not dwell on one's feelings after a day and evening of revelry, but anyone who has opened the door of a shed in which many hares have been hanging overnight, will understand something of how this last duty affected us. No one, by imagination alone, can realise the awful and " hanging odour " which issues from a shed harbouring a hundred or two shot hares. However, in due course we had the hampers packed, the carrier's ancient, rickety cart called for them, and we gave them our farewell blessing.

On the Feed.

It was very mild as we made our ways towards the Pond. As if spring was in the air, blackbirds, thrushes and robins were singing among the firs, for the Pond, whatever its former history may have been, is a covert of some six acres, into which a hundred and fifty young pheasants are brought in coops during the summer and to which birds are drawn from the wild country and thick hedgerows surrounding it. On the feed, which is a wide ride cut through the centre, I

have watched over two hundred pheasants busily pecking up the scattered corn. I have also stood in that feed and shot a score of rabbits driven from the jungle-like undergrowth. As we stood there this evening so many birds were singing that it seemed almost like the dawn chorus of a spring morning. Behind the black poplars that stand on the edge of the covert, the sky was a dark purple, and even as we whistled the pheasants a light sprinkling of snow began to fall.

Three days of shooting had thinned out the birds. On our arrival there was only one old hen on the feed, and she walking as though she suffered from corns. A shrill whistle or two, and about a dozen pheasants put in an appearance. Then came two moorhens, skulking out of the undergrowth, flirting their tails. I raised my stick as though it were a gun, and at once the sudden movement sent them darting out of sight. Pigeon were circling high overhead and some thirty were settled among the taller willows and poplars. They eyed us from a safe distance and some would no doubt have descended to join the pheasants had we left the scene.

But it is not economy to feed either pigeon or moorhen, and anyway, it is as well to know what birds are to be found on the feed. Already we had our eyes on a Chinese cock and two melanistic mutant hens—these, and another score of their companions, will do well for the breeding pens and will be picked up very shortly. The home-made traps are piled under a fir and these will presently be set up (but not set) about the feed. As the pheasants are fed, a handful of corn will be thrown under each up-tilted trap and the birds will get used to them. Then, one day, when the laying pens are ready, the safety stick will be removed from each trap and a bird will be caught as it feeds. Any pheasants disabled during the season will meet with a quick end, other birds will be released—only the fittest and finest, with a sheen on their plumage, bright eyes and good health will be retained for the pens. In this way, and with a change of blood, we can be sure of keeping a first-rate stock.

Very different is the feed this afternoon from that of six weeks ago. Then, the ride was literally swarming with pheasants, several of them outstanding characters. One, an

old cock bird, with a touch of mutant about him, had seen two seasons pass by. Once he made his appearance after a shooting day with some of his tail feathers missing and a certain but noticeable lack of dignity. On another occasion he must have damaged his leg on some wire, for he came limping on to the feed a week before pheasant shooting opened. Alas, he eventually met his end in a most inglorious manner. Then there was the hen who used to come stalking up to the feed bucket and attempt to jump into it. She would follow one up into the van that stood at one end of the ride. On shooting days, however, when the beaters advanced through the covert, thrashing out the undergrowth with their sticks, she became as wild as any pheasant ever bred. Half an hour later, when the guns had gone on to the last covert, we would slip back to scatter some feed and whistle the disturbed birds into something like confidence once more. And you could stake a fortune on that old hen being first on the scene, although up would go her head when the guns barked away down the valley. I believe, and that without much effort, that I could tell a tale of a hundred and one different pheasants, individuals all, that knew this feed while they lived. As a shepherd knows his sheep and a huntsman his hounds, so does a keeper get to know his birds and their characteristics. The feed is an education in itself.

It is January now and the trees and bushes have altered little since the leaves fell; the shrill whistle, in its own key, is the same; the pigeon circle, and the moorhen sneak out to steal the maize. Yet the chorus of bird voices reminds one that winter will not last for ever, while the all too few pheasants on the feed speak eloquently of shooting days over and the building up of a new stock for next season. Chaffinches and greenfinches, still in flocks that await the call of the feeder, seem more lively than they did a week or two ago, for the spirit of courtship is in the air.

Very soon now the feed will be "a thing of the past," for perhaps the Pond will have but half-a-dozen pheasants to grace it. For some days they will keep up the old habit of regularly visiting the ride on schedule time, though no whistling will be heard. Waiting there, they will scratch

among the straw and leaves, and the moorhen will watch them and a few pigeon will descend and strut pompously about, pecking at a stray grain that they are lucky to find. Then, one morning, when the sun shines down on the deserted feed there will sound a brave challenge and a loud clapping of wings, and from some way down the meadow hedge the call will be taken up by a second old cock, resplendent in full plumage, magnificent and awe-inspiring in his dignity and willingness to fight the world at large. Gradually will grow up through the straw and leaves of the feed the green shoots of a new undergrowth and of weeds and seeds buried by the very birds that scratched for them. Gradually the hazel and willow, the creeping bramble and the punishing briar, through which we pushed our difficult way on shooting days, will produce buds which in due course will burst into foliage. Then, as we pass down the ride, to visit a trap or two, we shall stand for a minute in the hot June sunshine, and our minds will hark back to those winter days when the feed was alive with busy birds and the rain poured down and dripped mercilessly from the bare trees. We shall whistle, perhaps, in the well-remembered key, with the only result that a pigeon clatters out of a bush in which she has a nest and disappears over the tree-tops, leaving us standing amid a world busy about its own affairs.

Night Pilot.

Some years ago I met, in a village, a Londoner who was spending a short holiday in the country. He took a bus to a neighbouring village and I promised to meet him at a chosen spot and to walk home with him that night. The time of the year was such that foxes and vixens were yapping to each other under the moon and the odd badger suddenly made the dark woods hideous with his "serenading." I kept the appointment, yarned for a bit, and we then set out homewards. For two miles we followed the hard highway, then "easing" him through some strands of a barbed-wire fence, I told him we would take a short cut. My chosen way led through a big wood, and I dallied that he might hear some of our country sounds. I led him down a variety of rides and, by the time we emerged at the far

gate, he had heard all he wanted to hear—and more. He told me later that he had on more than one occasion paid a visit to a mortuary, but his innate fear of such places had been soothed by cold facts, while his feelings on our nice little country walk by moonlight had caused him nightmares for some time to come. I explained to him that cities caused me nightmares, but I could not get him to see my point!

On another occasion, I met a man from Bristol. It was the same time of year, and, during the evening, I told him that I had to go to a certain wood that night and leave a note in the hut to be picked up by the woodman in the morning. He begged of me to allow him to accompany me, and I was only too glad to have a companion to talk to on the journey, which was about five miles in all. Our way led us through another big wood, where the rides were badly overgrown, and where in places springs made walking treacherous. Eventually we entered the gate of the main ride and proceeded along this muddy, deep-rutted thoroughfare for some two hundred yards. Then we branched off along a less wide ride, moss-carpeted but exceedingly boggy. Presently, we turned at right-angles and faced a steep climb up a narrow pathway where, here and there, brambles trailed on the ground and across which branches and twigs trespassed. Passing that way several times a day, I knew every inch of the path and every "trap" by its Christian name. But I was honestly amazed to find that my acquaintance picked his way along as though he, too, was well acquainted with the place, though occasionally a twig smacked against his face. From this narrow ride to the hunting-gate we had to climb uphill through a plantation of ash poles. The rough, twisty path was trodden only by the woodman and myself, and even in full daylight was difficult to follow. I forged ahead of my companion, putting my best foot forward. Pigeon clattered out of the poles, even as they had clattered with a din from the sides of the rides we had followed. In places it seemed that dozens were climbing into the darkness towards the sky, lost to all sense of direction.

But unerringly the man from Bristol followed in my wake, and when occasionally I spoke to him in a loud

whisper, he seemed to be perfectly at home. We must have crossed at least four boggy springs, into which a stranger must flounder, even as I had warned him he would unless he kept strictly at my heels. We climbed steadily. At one point I struck a match to examine a trap set in an ash-stub at a comparatively newly-scratched-out rabbit hole. By the time the match flared, my companion was by my side, showing every interest in the proceedings.

At long last, we left the wood behind, crossed four fields and ditches and came once more to the hard road. In due course I bid him good-night, though, in truth, it had long been morning, and arranged a meeting for midday. At the appointed hour he was there—all "townie" and bland innocence. We discussed the points of the previous walk, and finally I confessed that I was amazed at the way he had followed me through a big wood and all its pitfalls without coming to grief, especially as I had set more than one "trap" for him, to overcome his self-assurance. To this day I do not know whether he was cleverer in some respects than I gave him credit for, or whether necessity became the mother of invention. At all events, it appears that, finding himself in the dark in more than one sense, he had taken hold of the tail of my hound, and that worthy, knowing every millimetre of the ground and following at no great distance, had steered the man from Bristol through all the dangers of the big wood, and through or round the traps I had sought to lay for him!

A month or so ago I was in a market town when a hand fell on my shoulder. For a moment I thought the Old Man himself had come to claim me. I glanced round guiltily, and there was my companion from Bristol, with his wife, "covey" and a motor-cycle combination. It seems that he has chosen to desert a town life for a gamble in the country. He has taken a small-holding, where, with chickens and vegetables, he seems to be doing pretty well. I told him how his pilot of old had passed on to happier hunting grounds. In return for the information he admitted that never again would he allow me to take him on a midnight expedition. "Somehow," he said, "I knew I could trust that old dog, but I would never risk trusting another under

the same circumstances. Besides, you know what time we got home? You had better not mention that night to the missus. I told her I got a lift in a car and that we had carburettor trouble!"

Well, may my Bristolian friend find his fortune in the country! I know him well enough now to realise that even if eggs are bought at a shilling a dozen and broccoli fetch tuppence a-piece, he will find great pleasure in his environments what time he plies his hoe and blackens his neighbour's washing with smoke from his bonfire. A townsman born and bred, he has yet that affinity with heaven's broad acres and what may lie beneath to give him encouragement in a task that requires a stout heart and a will to succeed.

June Morning.

It had been a cheery party the evening before, and the "going" had been somewhat heavy, for it was seldom that D. and the boys paid us a visit, though, when they did, there was much to talk about, many events to be lived over again, and midnight was past before, rather noisily, we bid them "fair-bye, good-well" and watched their car bump slowly out of the lane into the street. Now, at 4.30, I was abroad once more, feeling a trifle shaken and weary perhaps, but rapidly reviving in the cool freshness of the morning air. At the corner of the street J. was waiting, with a slightly sheepish air, though his assumed impatience as he said "Come on! Come on!" might well have deceived anyone less well acquainted with him.

As we tramped through the deserted village street the light grew stronger, and by the time we had reached the tin sheds at the foot of the downs the thin sickle of the moon had paled in the sky and the brightness of day spread across the land. It was obvious that "another scorcher" was in the offing, but a heavy dew had fallen and the two dogs that accompanied us already looked as though they had enjoyed a swim.

As we nosed round the sheds and the two stacks beside them to see if the rats had taken the poison placed there for them on the previous evening, our old friend, the barn owl, came flapping down a hedgerow, suddenly to fall to the

ground as though shot, but he had evidently made a miscalculation, and was quickly on wing again. Thereafter, having circled the stacks and taken avoiding action as he suddenly spied us standing motionless, he beat away over the corner of the barley field and we watched him vanish into the stump of an elm where his family resided. As we proceeded along the old chalk cart-track, rabbits of varying sizes crossed ahead of us, running uphill to their burrows in the steep banks. Five times the .410 spoke, for we needed a rabbit or two for the pheasant copper and old Bob, the shepherd, had asked us to get a young rabbit for his sick wife. At one point and another we separated, to go off and examine tunnel and baited traps, but there was little enough doing until I came to two traps set to a partridge nest from off which the old bird had been snatched two nights before. From a distance I could see that something was afoot, the herbage being disturbed, and the guess I made was not far off the mark. Crouched in the plum hedge, as motionless as a stone, was a large ginger cat that belonged to a farm quite half-a-mile away. Balefully it glared at me and unpleasantly I glared back, remembering three partridge nests destroyed and a fourth deserted.

Eventually, with two and a half miles behind us, we came in sight of our goal—long lines of shuttered coops dotted across the gentle slope of a meadow, with a hut drawn up in the shelter of the fir covert. As we reached the latter, old Charles issued from a ride with the sprightly step of a boy. Seventy-two years had failed to dim his eyesight or damp down his wiry energy; neither had the party of the evening before left its mark upon him, though he was a little hoarse after the many songs he had sung. Straight from shutting up the coops he had come last evening, sunk a quart of "mild" in easy and appreciative style, then, having mopped his fierce little imperial, had entered almost immediately, by special request, upon his favourite refrain—"The Ship that Ne'er Returned." At 11.45 he had left us with an abrupt "good night" and the explanation that he was off home to get himself ready for the morning! Now, as we met him, it was quite obvious that the doings of the night had been thrust from mind and his one concern was

to get the broods fed and watered before setting off on his visit of vermin traps that would eventually lead him to the back of his cottage and a quick breakfast. Early afield as we had been, it seemed that he had been even earlier, and had already got busy with the mixing and the fetching of water from a trough on the far side of the covert.

As we separated to open the coops, it was difficult to keep one's eyes from the view that spread itself below us—the white lines of mist streaking the valley; the dark green fields of corn freely splashed with yellow patches of charlock; the lighter "squares" where clover had been cut; the rich shades of brown fallow intersected by flowering hedgerows. Every sense seemed to be enchanted by the general environment not only of vivid scenery, of the deafening chorus of bird voices, of the scent of newly-cut clover and the freshness of a perfect summer morning, but also by the very natural instincts of exhilaration that come to the good keeper on viewing healthy, lively chicks, bright-eyed and anxious to leave their coops for the world of insects that thrive on a bird-field with a sound bottom of herbage. There was none of that dreaded "snicking" among the broods, none of that listlessness which, while marking perhaps a change of head-feathers, may also point to "something not quite right," or even the beginning of a common ailment—in all probability gapes or coccidiosis.

Soon after the old watch hanging in the hut had turned 8 o'clock, we were once more foot-slogging our way across the downland, with a healthy gnawing in the seat of the stomach, and a knowledge that another day's work had been started satisfactorily. A very full programme lay ahead, but the vigour that thrives in those who spend their days in the open and whose profession, though a hard and often difficult one, is far more a pleasure than a task, cannot be kept down, and hours spent in some monotony under a blazing sun are all part and parcel of the game. With the rearing field as the centre of activity, there were yet the trapping rounds, the visits to nests and wild broods to be made and miles to walk from farm to farm where the cutters were at work.

CHAPTER XIV.

KEEPER'S SABBATH.

THE busy keeper knows no stated hours of work, and, during the rearing season, he is lucky if he can average five hours' sleep a night. Sunday is almost like any other day to him, though many keepers do not carry a gun on the Sabbath, and, in the afternoon, the wife and family may be invited to visit the bird-field, or the broods in covert. Our own Sundays were almost as busy as any week-day. From dawn until breakfast time we were engaged in feeding and watering, and once the coops had been distributed among coverts about the downs and lowlands there was a good deal more walking about to be done, for each beat had to be visited in turn, though underkeepers were naturally responsible now for looking after their own share of the broods. Having returned home to breakfast, and changed into our best Sunday-go-meeting suits and picked up ash sticks in place of guns, we set off on a round of the traps, taking things a "bit more easy" since there were no cutters at work and no farm hands to interview. On a hot morning, the downs bathed in sunlight, the continual song of larks in our ears, we usually followed the same routine, unless, that is, we suspected minor poaching activities to be afoot, or some out-of-the-way nest or brood of little partridges required a visit. Upwards we climbed, skirting the narrow fir-belt which held a few wild pheasants, arriving presently on the brow of a hill overlooking two distant villages and from which a good part of the shoot could be surveyed. Then down on to the Flats, and up again on to the downs proper, heading, by way of the trapping line, towards an isolated dew-pond where the dogs could be watered.

This pond was shoulder-deep in the centre and contained a few rushes. Around it, dragonflies flitted and in the water fat newts could be seen going about their business. There were plenty of signs of the work of a pair of hobbies that regularly visited the pool; the wings of dragonflies lay scattered and scintillating among the stones on the shore, for the gay little falcons played havoc among these gaudy fitterers, leaving only their wings, as a thrush leaves the

shells of snails—evidence of execution. Coming quietly to the pool's edge, it was not uncommon to find one or more grass-snakes lying submerged, only their heads above water, while quite a collection of cast skins could be found in the bottom of the one small bramble bush on the bank. Whether the snakes, by soaking their old skins, made their removal easier, or whether the reptiles were enjoying a "cooler" while catching flies and possibly newts, I cannot say. As the dogs waded out, swam, or wallowed in the cool water, off would come our shoes and stockings, for it is warm work walking the downs under a hot sun. Occasionally, I was less modest than my companion, "stripping out," as the saying goes, to enjoy fully in my birthday suit the warm sunshine and the cool water.

For half an hour or so we would remain sitting in this pleasant little hollow in the centre of the downs, for, being concealed ourselves, we could yet command an excellent view all round and keep an eye open for trespassers. On these Sunday rounds we might be accompanied by half a dozen dogs, but we only brought out those which could be trusted to remain sitting when so ordered. Thus, while visiting a covert into which pheasants had been introduced, there was no fear of the dogs following us.

A certain amount of anxiety always exists when broods have been in covert for some time and the young birds are beginning to roost. Cut fir branches are placed under the larches, partly to form cover, and partly to assist roosting. Our friend, the barn owl, may prove a nuisance value at such times. When, in the gloaming, the young pheasants have somewhat nervously ascended a foot or two to roost, the silent white shape of Old Flat Face beating down the ride will strike terror into them, and what more natural than that they should dive from their roosts and remain on the ground—easy prey for foxes and small ground vermin? Another terror, often deadly in its hunting, is the long-eared owl, a pair of which in a small covert will take heavy toll of young game until given "marching orders." Searching through such a covert, we have found the remains of many little pheasants on the twig-built platform of an old pigeon's nest, and there, motionless, pressed against the bole of a

larch, two "horned" owls the presence of which we had somehow overlooked. Accordingly, on our Sunday morning rounds, if any pheasants were reported missing, we searched the covert systematically, usually emerging with a small bag of pigeon squabs poked from nests, or gathered after a sweat-raising climb through a network of brittle twigs and branches. Squab and rabbit pie, with a slice or two of fat bacon, cannot be sneezed at, even by the keeper to whom this is no strange summer dish.

Soon after midday we returned to the village, visiting traps on the way, and joined the Parliament of keepers from neighbouring estates forgathered at the inn. At these Parliaments we learned much, swopping notes and information, and lapsing into reminiscences as time wore on. After lunch at home, a further long trek to the downs and the coverts, from thence by hedgerow and copse to the low country, there to feed and water our own "stock" and examine tunnel and baited traps, partridge broods and second nests. Also, a greater part of the evening was spent about the estate attending to one job and another, when a second session of "Parliament" was held to wind up another week, or start a new one—whichever view you may take of the keeper's Sabbath.

Another Sunday, and as we set off down the village street towards the hills, with the best-behaved of the dogs at heel, we fell in with one or two people on their way to early morning service. At daybreak we had been down to the Lower Commons to feed the few pheasants and to look at one or two traps. Now, "brushed up" for the after-breakfast Sabbath morning round, ash-plants under arms, we have a feeling that all is well with the world. The last cottages left behind, we follow the cattle track uphill towards the partridge nesting belt, glancing idly at two nests in the plum-and-privet hedge which borders the paddock. Both old birds are sitting tight and one cock is out among the thoroughbreds, albeit with an eye on us. At the corner of the belt is an old hay-stack and in the tunnel-trap, set beside it, a doe rat that had evidently been looking for a night-nursery. Caught across the body in a ten-year-old Lane trap, she is dead and stiff and my companion hangs her on

the fence beside the bodies of two hedgehogs and a weasel while I re-set the trap. At the edge of the belt a baited trap has taken toll of a hunting rook, but four tunnel-traps remain set and the cage-trap on the bank above, set for a hawk, has not been visited. Down now across the Flats, via hedges in which we pay a call on different traps and nests, and so uphill to the bird-field under the slope of the downs.

Cover, here, is all too sparse, but there is a good "bottom" of clover and herbs, and this morning, with a warm sun shining down over coverts and fields, the broods are looking their best—the more advanced showing a rare liveliness, the later-hatched almost growing as we watch them. Old Charlie, busy with the watering, merely nods to us. It is apparent that he has had a "stiff" Saturday night, and we recall that yesterday was his seventy-third birthday. Alas, it appears, after all, that nothing is right with the world. There are two or three sick-looking chicks in the coop nearest the cooker, and that old Rhode Island from Smith's has trampled on two of her offspring. The barren pair of partridges from Well Barn has been paying the coops another visit and the cock bird had been seen trying to kill the six little pheasants at the corner. Sunday or no Sunday, the old So-and-so would have been dead by now had not one of S——'s cartridges misfired. A fox from that breeding-place of all foxes, U—— Wood, had been in Riddles and slain a bantam and half buried it by the reservoir. "If the boss thinks . . ., etc.!"

Murmuring something about "birthday hang-over," and "someone's bitter," we leave Charlie and the bird-field with that reluctance one always feels and carry on across the hill to the sheep-track over which drovers of old brought cattle and horses all the way from Bristol and onwards right across England. In the valley, the slopes of which are lined with junipers, we scatter a handful of feed in places where partridges are nesting and presently, at the hut used by those who spend their time filling up rabbit-scrapes and mole-runs on the gallops, we sit down to have a quiet smoke.

A lovely morning this, with the soft outlines of the hills visible where the valley slopes gently upwards to the second highest point of the county. Over the dew-pond a kestrel

hovers and we surmise where she has nested. Pigeon are sailing out from the fir-covert above Big Bull, returning to its sheltering larches. From where we sit, we can hear Roy, Old Bob's sheep-dog, rounding up his charges and we say many hard things about the pair of them, despite the most friendly relationship. Why can't the old devil go about his job quietly instead of sending the dog miles ahead to gallop the flock all over the place where birds are sitting? The blue-pencil sheep are bad enough cropping down what little nesting cover there is, but when a flock, far too big for the place, is raced about the ground by a dog, no self-respecting keeper can expect late pheasants, and partridges to hatch off well, or, if they do, for the broods to survive a stampede of sheep.

Although the day is hot the dogs are panting, and so, in due course, we rise and take them over to the pond for a drink and a swim. From there, we continue our round to the "outposts of Empire"—to the small fir coverts on the boundary where the gypsies camp until we come on the scene. On one never-to-be-forgotten morning we found, not gypsies, but a family of nudists and a caravan. As though this scene was nothing unusual they invited us to partake of a cup of tea, but, restraining our secret amusement and (perhaps) blushes, we asked them to don their apparel and move on.

I could write a whole book on every one of those Sunday rounds, which went on season by season, for, to the keeper, every trap, every nest, every bird or beast seen, holds some interest, however common it may be. Indeed, the wheatear calls for almost as much attention as the pheasant; the stonechat as the partridge; the fieldfares and redwings as the "vermin birds" that strike terror into the hearts of the smaller fry which abound among the coverts and the junipers.

And so back to the village in time to call at the inn before lunch—there to chat for a while with other keepers, shepherds and farm labourers, often to pick up useful information, but certainly to cement the good and useful relations which all should share if an extensive shoot is to be run successfully.

CHAPTER XV.

REARING FIELD EPISODES.

AFTER hard hours under a broiling sun, spent mainly in paying visits to outlying farms, where the cutters are at work, with periodical visits to the bird-field, that last chapter of the day's labours arrives—the closing up of the coops for the nights. Now, when young pheasants are in the "chick" stage and evenings are cool, the broods snuggle under their respective foster-mothers comparatively early, and there is no difficulty in approaching the coops from the rear, arranging their sliding, or push-on boards and so completing the job in good time to get down to the village an hour or so before the landlord thinks of calling "Time."

On the other hand, as the chicks progress, get their second head-feathers and the time is not far distant when they will be removed to covert, they show less inclination to go to bed early, preferring to wander in, or sit about the grass outside the coops. Particularly on warm, muggy evenings do they object to entering the coops and being brooded by the hen. During the day, except for a few excursions among the grass and while they are feeding, they have taken advantage of the shade between leaning boards and coops and of green branches cut and laid beside the coops for that purpose.

Now, as the sun vanishes behind the western slope of the downs, they stalk at will among the jungle of grass, pecking daintily here and there, but ever on the alert and ready to make off at one's approach. At last, however, first one and then another brood decides to call it a day and creep between the spars preparatory to settling down for the night. "Good work," thinks the waiting keeper, "another few minutes and the last coop will be closed and I shall just get down to 'The Boôt' before turning-out time." But he should know better! Perhaps all but the last coop is shut up, and as this is approached with great stealth from the rear, a gentle "peep" is heard and a little pheasant hops

through the spars, followed by two more, to stand and regard the motionless man with bright, insolent eyes. There is nothing for it but to retire to a distance and watch one's opportunity—an opportunity which, alas, may be long in coming. Something like watching for a kettle to boil! The leader chick of the rebels may presently decide to return to the coop, but it may, on the other hand, sally irritatingly forth among the grass and encourage the rest of the brood to join it. I know times when the closing of that last coop has taken a full half-hour.

So on the eve of a day I have cause to remember. Thunder threatened, the atmosphere was as close as could be, and three coops remained open, their inmates showing no desire to settle down. There was only one thing to be done if the rattle in our throats was to be cured before we developed gapes; so, approaching old Charlie, we entered into what is commonly known as a "brush," the loser of this coin-tossing game to remain behind to close up the coops, the other two to depart in haste to the village for a well-earned drink, and to procure a bottle for the unfortunate third party. On this occasion Charlie was unlucky, and J. and I quickly left him in charge.

At one period of the journey homewards we broke off to climb a steep slope and close in the coops of the eighty or so ducklings we had in a wire-netting enclosure between a covert and a dew-pond. Here our task was simple, for, though you cannot drive pheasant chicks into their coops, ducklings are another matter, and in less than no time the job was accomplished, three rat-traps set nearby, and we stood for a moment taking a last look out over the country stretching away below us.

"Remember that field?" I inquired, pointing towards a far-distant farm. There was no need to pick out the specific acres to which I alluded, for J. immediately became wrathful. It recalled one of those small, dark incidents belonging to a previous season—one of those minor affairs which are inclined to stick in the gullet. One boundary of a 3,000 acre shoot bordered this farm and there had been, in the past, friction over a small matter; but the farmer had shortly left the neighbourhood. Not that this had any bearing on the incident, but the fact that it occurred in



FERRETS AND FERRETING

“ . . . has the fleck cleaned from its claws.”



SHEPHERDS AND GAME

“The sheep are bad enough cropping down the nesting cover”

the vicinity of past warfare could not be altogether overlooked. We had reared over a hundred duck which spent their time between the dew-pond and the covert, and soon after they had attained full powers of flight, they had winged across country at dusk one evening and followed some genuine wild duck on to the barley stubbles of the field I pointed out. There, a number of them were shot, and one or two came back crippled on to the feed. Now, all is fair in love and war, but we knew that "they" knew the duck they were shooting "belonged" to us, for while the wild birds sheered off after a few shots had been fired, our charges circled again and again, suffering sorely from their baptism of fire. Naturally, we expected a certain number of duck to be lost to "outside influences," and allowed for this by rearing a few more than usual, but we regarded this particular incident as something approaching a hostile act, particularly after certain remarks that were bandied about finally came to our ears.

As we passed one of our "partridge nurseries," or nesting belts, we stopped to look at two traps, set at the corner of the low wire, and to admire the bloom of broom, wild rose and several other flowering shrubs. Then, down the sunken chalk lane, on to the road proper, and in another quarter of an hour we were seated, mopping our brows, on the old wooden forms in the yard of "The Boot," imbibing what some people would call bad ale, but knowing full well that no such thing ever existed! Nor did we overlook old Charlie's bottle, making this, in the generosity of our hearts, a "two-way bet"!

There comes infallibly each year a period when the broods from the rearing field are ready to be taken to covert.

Although one year we had some difficulty in getting suitable ground for a bird-field, owing to certain farms changing hands, the site finally chosen was almost ideal. Facing the right direction and gently sloping; on sound soil with a rare bottom of mixed herbage that only downland can produce; handy to water and with good observation, there was yet one snag which faced us. One or two of the fir coverts into which coops must be moved lay little short of three-quarters of a mile away. Moreover, not only was

the ground between bird-field and coverts "up hill and down dale," but there were three wire fences to be crossed, fences with no gates in them. To the uninitiated this may mean little, but to the man well loaded up, and with a coop balanced somewhat precariously on his back, this having been placed there by a second member of the "moving" party, each wire fence encountered is a stiff obstacle, even when some of the strands have been tied together and bound with sacking. I have moved coops longer distances on horse-drawn skimmers and on motor-lorries, but this game of shifting them on the shoulders hour after hour for two nights and over difficult country is a task calling for well-developed muscles and stamina. Remember, we were working long days as well!

The night we had chosen to start the move was almost perfect, with a bright moon floating over the hills and quite a nip in the air. Rides in the coverts had been prepared for the coops, and three of us gathered quietly on the bird-field, having earlier closed in the broods with less than usual difficulty. "I'll go first," I whispered, and quietly sliding open the front of No. 1 coop so that only two spars showed, I placed the open mouth of a thin sack to the gap, steadying myself as the inmates came hustling out into the trap. Making sure that none remained in the coop, the mouth of the sack was tied with ready-prepared twine and the heaving bundle was laid gently on one side. Now, the old hen was removed, protesting, and placed in a game-bag slung over the shoulder; the water-tin picked up and pocketed; the coop closed and turned over; the bag of chicks (or shall we promote them to the status of poults?) placed inside; J. heaved the coop on to my shoulders; and away I started on the first trip of the season. J. would be following in less than five minutes.

On a nice cool moonlit night the downland scene can be entrancing, and for a few hundred yards even the shoulder burden of a coop need not weigh heavily upon one. True, with head bent half forward enjoyment of detailed observation is not at its best, although the keeper is well versed in that not-so-simple-as-it-seems art of "lowering" the face which is a feature of detection, and making full use of his

eyes. Now, in the yellow moonlight that spread over the downs the somewhat eerie shapes of stone-curlew flitted, their weird but musical wailing coming from first one direction, then from another. Well, I thought, has this strange "thick-kneed" (actually the knee is not unusual, as is commonly believed, the name "thick-knee" curiously arising from the apparently swollen heel) been called the night-hawk—an appellation shared by that other "curio" of the coverts, the nightjar.

Apart from these eerie cries, which I emphasise are by no means unmusical, and the occasional call of owl and plover, the downs were wrapped in a cloak of silence. At the dark entrance of the ride, running the length of the fir covert, the tattered remnants of a few stoats and a sparrowhawk hung on the wire—a tribute to the work of Old Charlie, whose beat it was. Over the last fence, along the mossy path at the other end of which a light patch of sky showed like a storm-lantern, and gently the coop was lowered. A short rest, ears attune for sounds of J.'s approach—that faint swishing of feet through thin grass—and I got busy with the next chapter of events. The brood-sack rescued from the coop, the latter was "stood down" on firm ground; bits of the ride were heeled up and forced against the bottom where any crack existed through which a little pheasant might make its escape, or small vermin an entry; the old hen tugged gently from the game-bag and placed in the coop; the front-board opened a trifle and the mouth of the sack placed against the opening, the little birds being persuaded to take up residence; the water-tin set down. A final look round to see that all was in order and I was ready to help J. with his coop, after which we did an about turn and set our faces towards the bird-field and a gruff lecture from Old Charlie about dallying by the wayside! How the memory of such nights returns to one! How pleasant such hard labour seems now that it has passed into the background of long ago events! We cursed and sweated at the time, yet how much would I not give (if I had it!) to know that to-night and to-morrow night we were going to repeat the old programme.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITH ROD AND LINE.

HAVING earlier in this book written about holes in trees, I feel compelled briefly to explore holes in the river-bed. I suppose most of us have our pet fears and superstitions, and I confess that there are certain deep spots in the river I most frequent that give me a feeling of uneasiness. Why this should be, it is difficult to say, though I imagine that certain incidents when I was young may have had something to do with it. It so happened that, in the course of three years, I was unfortunate, when fishing and bird-nesting, in discovering one or two bodies—gruesome events that overshadowed the joys of those expeditions. Happily, there are many holes I wot of in our river which hold pleasant memories and expectations.

On a summer's day, when the water is clear, by lying flat and cupping one's face in one's hands, a fairly vivid picture can be gathered of what life is like below the surface. Thus, to one's memory flash pictures of gaily-coloured perch (though in deep water, appearing as dark fish with darker stripes about their bodies) patrolling the miniature caves and chasms of mountainous landslides, or rather bank-slides; of shoals of roach, restlessly swimming up and down, about-turning as they reach the limit of their beat; of large, pig-like barbel rubbing their noses against the iron sluice-gates of the weir, feeding from the green slimy weed; of fat, lazy chub, cruising beneath overhanging branches, waiting for a spent insect to drop on to the river's surface; of the well-camouflaged pike lying stiller than the weaving weed which is its ambush, its very pose and form the essence of cruel ferocity. Pictures also come to mind of old, weed-grown piles—tackleshops of the river-bed—round which fish swim and among which they love to dash when they feel themselves hooked.

I have in mind now a hole forty feet in depth from which I have taken many eels, but no other fish. Site of an old mill, a picture was drawn of it for me by a diver who went

down to recover the body of a child. There, among a jungle of waving lily stems and other subaquatic vegetation, he found a floor littered with huge stones and lumps of concrete. For every eel hooked and landed in this place, a score will get off free. Night-lines, if legal (which they art not) would avail the angler nothing, for an eel swallowing a lob or a dead gudgeon, would immediately repair to cover under a stone. A "bite" from an eel, and the angler must at once commence pulling in before it has time to seek sanctuary.

Another deep hole, from which barbel and bream are taken, has a tunnel under its floor formed as the current races in times of flood under a roofing of rock. Once a big barbel was speared on a punt-pole at the edge of this hole and brought to the surface. Nearby I saw a strange sight one summer day. A shoal of fish lay close to the surface, no less than fifty in number and many of them up to and over 3 lb. People crowded to the bank to view this flotilla, and many wild guesses were made as to their identity. Nothing like it had been seen before or since, but here, most certainly, were the cream of the bream population, and I believe the hole I have mentioned to be their ancestral home. I have fished the place often enough, but with little luck and the loss of much tackle.

Such deep places are the cemetery of water-logged trees and branches—a fact for which tackle-makers should be grateful! Once I foolishly cast out two weights from the stern and bow of a canoe in which I was fishing when the current was swift. They caught among the rubbish on the river-bed and the canoe commenced to turn over. Swift slashes with a knife of the clothes line which held them saved the situation.

At the self-same spot a few seasons previous, my canoe had overturned one rough winter's day when there was ice along the edges of the river. I came up under the craft, but managed to push myself down and make a second appearance on the right side of the canoe. Foolishly, I attempted to turn it over while I was wearing heavy clothing and Wellingtons. Nearly drowned, I passed into unconsciousness, but came to on drifting on to some shallows. I was very ill after creeping on to the bank, but two facts

were registered in my mind: (a) for some reason I would not shout for help, though I knew help to be within shouting distance; (b) my past life did not unfold itself before me!

An acquaintance I met on my local travels caught two good (for this water) pike—an $8\frac{3}{4}$ pounder and one of $10\frac{1}{2}$ lb. It was evident that the fish had paired and from observation the lucky angler had been able to make a note of their times of feeding and each fell to his live-bait within ten minutes, with a three-day interval between the captures.

Encouraged to go and do likewise, I 'phoned up a friend, a novice to the art of angling, and asked him to accompany me on a day's expedition, ordering him to buy a couple of spinners on his way through a town. By 10.30 on the appointed day, he fell off his cycle at my gate, and, in due course, we made for the nearest inn to the water we were honouring with our presence and parked there. A mile distant was a small weirpool which I had never fished, but which always looks to me to be a most likely spot for pike. To this we made our way, congratulating ourselves that we had chosen such a perfect, almost spring-like morning.

On the meadow by the pool a flock of pigeon were feeding, probably on clover-leaf, and they did not rise until we were almost within shooting range of them; even then, they settled in a poplar tree close by and seemingly took an interest in our rigging up the tackle. A pair of duck rose from a quiet eddy beside the weir-stream, the duck quacking noisily as the pair flew round in circles, gaining height.

As I put my rod together I noted with some irritation that I had forgotten to have the top ring repaired; the porcelain had broken away and it seemed likely that the line would be continually catching up between wire and rod. Nor did my irritation improve when, after two casts, the line did catch and the large kidney-spoon, checked in its flight, took a neat swoop into the boughs of an overhanging tree. An effort—a somewhat dangerous effort—to climb the tree proved fruitless; nor was I able to shoot the spoon out of its hold with my catapult! It was a case of "do or die," and finally the line broke and the spinner remained in the branches, winking derisively at us as the sun caught its red and silver sheen. Tossing for the second spinner, I was

successful in winning it, but after a few casts I cleverly hooked some unmovable object in the centre of the pool and a further break was necessary.

That is the devil of fishing water about the depth and snags of which one is ignorant. I had been told at this particular spot there were fourteen feet of water, but I swear there were no more than six.

These early and serious accidents meant that we must return to the nearest town, five miles away, and procure fresh spoons, and this we did. At the tackle-shop we were told that it was unlikely that they would be able to get in any more spinners for at least a week, but, happily, they had a few in stock. We bought four of these, to be on the safe side. Then, it being market day, we met two farmer friends, and angling was delayed for a couple of hours!

By early afternoon we had returned to the river, but at a different place. Our friends had advised this new reach, for many fish are caught here at this time of year, it being an off-shoot from the wider water and one used by paired pike setting up housekeeping together. For an hour or so we fished, but without getting even the suspicion of a run. Then wicked fortune again took a hand. Out flew my spinner and hooked itself on a barbed-wire fence and I was forced to wade waist-deep through flood-water to retrieve it. By now a busy wind had risen and the water proved as cold as charity, but we continued to spin for some time. It was while I was engrossed in getting a tangle out of my companion's line, and while he was using my tackle, that I received a sharp blow on the back of my thighs, just below my seat, and next instant I made the discovery that the big triangle of a spinner had hooked into both legs of my breeches and that I was powerless to move. And, being good fishermen, we found that neither of us had brought a pocket knife. That one of us had forgotten to do so was understandable; that both had omitted to do so was more than a coincidence! As my friend, bent double, did his best to "undo the doings" I gave him a piece of my mind, but I fear his amusement was more in evidence than his contrition, and it took him quite ten minutes to recover his

spoon from the seat of operations. Thereafter, we decided to call it a day—a blank day, with the accent on the blank.

Why record such an outing? I do so because, in spite of accidents and an empty creel, there was much to be enjoyed. We put up several pairs of duck, and three Canada geese which came swimming most unexpectedly round a bend. We watched a kingfisher proving more successful in his endeavours than we had been. He sat, this feathered jewel, on a willow twig, eyeing the water beneath with a keen, sharp eye. Suddenly he fell like a stone, making a splash like a half-pound weight, remaining under water for some seconds before reappearing with a minnow, and then darting off to another tree upstream, where he consumed his prize. We saw plover and pigeon flocks, common enough sights, yet each fresh one seen proving a source of new interest. It gives me great satisfaction to catch fish, but a blank day is never a wasted one. There is so much to see and hold the interest beside the stream, that even the ignominy of being doubly hooked in the pants by an amateur angler who shows little sorrow for his error, fails to dull the joys of such an expedition. Indeed, on the contrary, such an incident enlivens the day. And, after all, it might have been worse—I mean to say, I might have suffered in the flesh!

A message came to me. Did I happen to be going to a certain river village, or, alternatively, could I possibly find time to go there? Mr. M. was coming down next week-end to have a “go” at the chub, and he wanted the punt rowed up and left at this very charming spot. I replied that I could find time to take the punt up, and it would be there before the Friday night when Mr. M. arrived. True, I did not want the exercise, and I was, in fact, too busy really to undertake the job, but, calling suddenly to mind those early morning trips after chub in previous years, I made a decision to row the punt up, fishing as I went.

When I reached the river bank it was just getting light. Veils of mist drifted over the water and only the earliest birds had commenced to sing. There would be few chub “up” yet, though the night had been muggy and the temperature of the water high. I knew from experience, however, that the first mile of river was hardly worth fishing,

so I decided to row lazily over this, enjoying the " best part of the day " and making certain observations.

Truly, there is no peace on earth like the peace of the river at this hour, and there can be few spots more beautiful. The surface of the water remains an unbroken mirror, till, presently, a lively dace dimples its calm, or a playful roach swirls at a seed-head it has mistaken for some hapless insect. Rounding the bend, I came suddenly on a family of duck, of " flapper " size, that stared at the sudden apparition of a punt looming up out of the wreaths of mist. Obviously wondering whether to swim, dive, or " flap," they eventually sorted out their nerves and followed their mother into the shelter of a dense reed-bed. Opposite the old horse-ferry, I picked up my rod, unhooked the Brown Palmer from the ring above the butt and made one or two " false " casts. Then, holding the pointed bows of the punt towards an overhanging willow some way up the far bank, I rowed carefully and silently towards it. I knew of old that chub used to lie here, their great backs breaking the surface of the water during the heat of the day, their hunger such that they would race and scramble for a fly cleverly dropped just upstream of the flotilla. This morning, however, as my fly fell " just right," there came only a faint movement of the water, with no " take." I tried again, but without result. Perhaps it was a bit early yet; probably the fish would not surface until the warmth and brightness of the sun made themselves felt.

For half-a-mile I fished on, catching only one little, albeit extraordinarily game " chubbling," which showed no hurt from its adventure on being placed back in the river, except to put as much distance as possible, and as quickly as possible, between itself and man. Among the willows and river-side trees pigeon coo-ed and doves crooned, every now and again sailing into the air and gliding out over the meadows. An old cock moorhen, its red frontal plate conspicuous enough above a nest on a stump, remained " sitting " as I passed within a few feet. A water-vole, its black beady eyes fixed on the punt, continued to chew a reed it had felled and dragged to the floating raft on which it sat.

In the whole course of my journey I saw only one worthy fish, and this little more than 2 lb. It lay downstream of a single bent reed almost in mid-river. I stood up in the boat and noted its form some inches under the surface, but by its very attitude I had an idea it would take any insect falling from the trembling reed. My fly fell a little to the right of where I had intended it to settle, but instantly there came a swirl in the water, a moment of anxious decision, and then I struck, finding that at last I had made contact with a chub. Down bored the fish, and then circled slowly round the bows of the punt towards the far bank. A steady check on these manoeuvres, however, quickly told, and in a few minutes I drew it alongside the boat, apparently played out, but in reality ready to make a final rush for freedom at sight of the approaching net.

I had a mind to return my catch to the river, but hesitated for two reasons. First, I knew an old lady living in a tiny thatched cottage, who would welcome the fish as a boarder! Secondly, I had acquaintances with disbelieving natures, and every angler knows what it is to feel like when, having returned a fairly good fish to the water, his friends winkingly doubt his story! Consequently, after tying up the punt at her moorings, I landed on the bank with rod and net—in the latter the half-moon shape of quite a respectable fish.

I am sometimes asked which is my favourite kind of "coarse" fishing, and my reply is invariably that I really cannot say. Each kind has its own peculiar charm. Pike fishing—spinning, or live-baiting—has all that anticipatory excitement connected with the catching of heavy and ferocious fish, of the trying out of deep holes and likely looking lay-bys. And yet the angling blood in me has coursed just as pleasantly when, having raked up an area of gravel, I watched the gudgeon through the clear water cautiously wriggling their way to the scene of the disturbance and towards the little red worm on the hook bumping over the stones where the "mist" is beginning to clear.

Then there is that most delicate of all "coarse" fishing—the pursuit of roach and dace with the finest of tackle, the bait, perhaps, a gentle or the little purple elderberry. Here, with the stream flowing fast or slow, with the current curling

and eddying and the well-balanced quill dancing and cavorting, or sedately retreating inch by inch, the tension of eye and wrist-muscle are strained for the strike, while the playing of the gaily-hued roach, or the silver dace becomes a matter of skill and delight such as only your true angler understands.

Again, there is the questing after that fierce and gaudy fellow, the perch. You may see him in shoals patrolling his beat among the lily-stalks, or the fortification of old piles and land-slides. You may become aware of his presence as he dashes madly among the cloud of minnows on the shallows, or ambushes his prey among the cement bags and stones in the fast water of the weir. Or he may appear suddenly under the very bows of your punt, or under the staging where the boats strain at their painters. He is a worthy foe when well-grown, a savage and a hungry feeder. I am very fond of the perch in more ways than one, and in many more ways than one can we set about catching him.

The specialist of the fly, drifting slowly downstream, his well-controlled line curving and falling with a glint of light, his "fancy" settling light as thistledown under the overhanging willows, or beside the old brick piers of the bridge, may set his heart on the cunning cannibal trout, the big chub, or the fanciful dace, scorning the patient man who ledgers for bream or carp, barbel or eel. Again, however, it must be pointed out, there is an exact science, a special attraction to each and every kind of angling, while we must not forget that season, opportunity and environment each and all exert an influence for better or for worse.

Myself, a roving angler and an opportunist who has on the spur of the moment fixed up a fly-rod and ledgered with it for pike, who has likewise fly-fished for chub with a roach rod that might almost be termed a pole—I can become a specialist at a moment's notice, sticking to one form of fishing for days on end, yet enjoying the complete variation of the whole gamut of angling throughout the season!


There is, however, one form of fishing that perhaps does invite my preference—over a short summer period at least. This is the attempted catching of those great, ugly,

wallowing, pig-like, uneatable hulks called barbel. There is something about these easy-going, albeit distinctly evasive and somewhat mysterious fish which challenges one's skill and general conceit as an angler. Barbel fishermen are comparatively few and far between on water where I fish, though, during the first decade of the century, a number of old Thames anglers arrived each year at their respective inns with almost the sole object of making spectacular catches of these fish. I write "spectacular" advisedly, for I can remember seeing, even in the second decade of this century, "bags" of barbel laid out on view on the decks of river steamers. These old anglers did things in style. For weeks before their arrival, big consignments of lob-worms were despatched at their order to riverside destinations—to the men employed by them to bait-up barbel swims. Then, on a week-end visit, a punt loaded up with tackle and provisions (including a stone jar) and a boy to row the boat—and upstream through the cold morning mist nosed her way the good punt Barbelfisher.

That was part of the background to barbel catching as I first knew it, and, though I have spent nights of worm-catching and hours of baiting up, I like to view these fish and their curious ways from a different angle. I mark them on early summer mornings, nosing their way among the reed-beds until every reed is waving or a-quiver as if a wind passed among them, when indeed there is not so much as a gentle zephyr to waft the mist-wreaths from the water's surface. I see them, through several feet of water, big, slow-moving shapes rubbing against the piles of the bridge, every now and again turning lazily over in a semi-roll. I recall certain deep pools along the course of the river where they have sometimes fallen foul of my ledger bait—bait for chub and big bottom-feeding roach, for a possible tench or an eel, rather than for barbel.

But far more intimate is my association with them in the well-worn channel between the twin streams of the weir—a channel driven out of the river-bed by the ceaseless rush of heavy water during autumn and winter as it escapes beneath the raised iron sluices. Standing motionless on the bridge of the weir in the finer months, gazing down through the clear

water, I have watched with interest—a profitable reconnaissance for later activities—the heavy forms of barbel advancing to nose the weed-covered sluice gates, then dropping back out of sight into deeper water. A dozen or more great fish have been in view at one time. Other barbel, influenced by the early morning sunshine breaking through the river mist, have jumped a foot out of water, the red of their bellies unmistakably identifying them for what they are. Later, the whole school will move away to the rotten piles of an old weir downstream, or to certain gravel shallows. Thus I see them and bear them in mind, and, so doing, feel once more that first mad rush of a hooked fish, followed by the heavy boring and eventual sulking of it as it seeks to regain its liberty in the still, deep places of its kind.



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